

Reading the Gospels

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Origen was a native Alexandrian of the 2nd century CE, highly educated in Greek, Jewish and Christian wisdom. At the young age of 17 he was made Head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, successor to Clement. He was an extremely talented scholar and a gifted teacher. In his most important work '*On First Principles*' he outlines systematically a slow, profound and attentive way of reading Scripture.

He emphasizes that there are four levels of reading Scripture. He starts by pointing us to the first level of reading Scripture: taking the text literally, concentrating on the surface meaning – and that is important in itself. But he emphasizes that we need to go beyond that to the moral implied in what we have read. Following that, he encourages us go even further and look at the allegorical meaning of this passage. This in turn would finally lead us to be confronted with the spirit of the given text. This way of engaging with Scripture came to be known since Origen as the discipline of '*Lectio Divina*'.

The real point of reading Scripture in this profound way according to Origen is that it can lead to sudden insights; in fact, it may well lead to an encounter with the risen Christ, the Word, a truly mystical experience. This encounter has undoubtedly a profound effect on the individual, altering their view of reality. We would know then at a deep level who Jesus is and what his meaning is for us and for all of humanity. What we read not only helps us to understand the essential nature of Jesus, but the resonance of the text also highlights what stops us realising our own essential nature. True understanding of Scripture in this way finally leads to communion of our true '*self*' and the Christ within.

In the Benedictine tradition engagement with Scripture in this fashion followed a clear path. First there was *lectio*. In St Benedict's time that meant listening to a text read out during services; the individual monks or nuns might not be able to read. This was then followed by *meditatio*. By that was meant the savouring of the text by the individual in their own time. A personal resonance with the text might result in a spontaneous prayer *oratio* and that experience could lead to deep silent prayer *contemplatio*.

This same discipline is as valid for us as it was in earlier times. Meditation often leads to reading Scripture in a more profound way and that in turn leads to self-knowledge, knowledge of Christ, and as a consequence even deeper life transforming prayer.

Laurence Freeman says in '*Jesus, the Teacher Within*': "*By meditation I mean not just the work of pure prayer but the whole life-field of self-knowledge which it drives.*"