

# encounter



ENCOUNTER LOVE EQUIP LEAD

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## Cultivating a Biblical Imagination

Dr Roshan Allpress  
National Principal/CEO



C.S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image* wrote of the tragic loss of the rich cultural world of Medieval Christendom: an interwoven imaginarium built on a foundation of Scripture – girded by widely-known stories, cathedrals, and a dense cosmology – that fostered faithfulness and flourishing for millions.<sup>1</sup> Lewis, along with his fellow Inklings J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Dorothy Sayers,<sup>2</sup> worked to enrich the atrophied cultural artistry of twentieth-century British Christians – understanding that faith requires not only sound doctrine, but redemptive imagination.<sup>3</sup>

In twenty-first century Aotearoa New Zealand, we face an even more fundamental challenge to our collective Christian imagination. The Biblical soil, out of which came the faithfulness and cultural brilliance of Medieval Christians, the Inklings, and countless other reformers and culture-makers throughout the centuries, is very poorly tilled. Many Christians do not have even the most basic familiarity with the text and stories of the Bible, and therefore lack the imaginative source material out of which they might develop new faithful practices, or incisive cultural expressions.

This problem goes much deeper than the turn away from Sunday Schools, the disconnectedness of our devotional readings, or the replacement of exegetical preaching with more thematic studies that do not engage directly with the text of Scripture – though these are losses.

Consider how a fan becomes immersed in the latest Marvel or DC movie.<sup>4</sup> Loving the characters and plot twists, watching other movies and making connections, eventually going back to the books and learning the back stories. All the while becoming deeply familiar with the tropes and symbolism of the stories – recognising them as they recur and change and add layers of meaning.

Too few of us read the Bible like this.

We do not know that it is worth trying, nor do we know how.

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## ADVENT READINGS

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If you would like more copies for your church or community please email [jmackie@laidlaw.ac.nz](mailto:jmackie@laidlaw.ac.nz)

# Meditating on Scripture

Dr David Crawley  
Senior Lecturer – School of Theology

The courses I enjoyed the most as a theological student were those that involved digging into the text of Scripture, using the best exegetical tools available. That enjoyment continued into my postgrad years, when I completed a thesis on the Gospel of Luke, and it stays with me today. After finishing my theological study I had the opportunity to teach others in the same disciplines that I had relished. The knowledge I had gained and was now seeking to share was great, but increasingly I became aware of something that was not so great. My inner world – the emotional and spiritual heart of my life – was impoverished, primarily due to my own neglect through the busy years of study.

During a staff retreat around that time we were asked to meditate, in silence, on Exodus 33. The invitation was to listen and to pray, rather than to exegete. I read how Moses would pitch a tent outside the camp – the “tent of meeting” – where people would go to enquire of God. Then came verse 11: “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” What my head

made of these words I can’t remember, but my heart registered a strong response. What did I feel? Vulnerability. Sadness. Envy. Why? Because I didn’t know what these words meant, at a personal and relational level. My knowing *about* God had advanced through the years, but my knowing *of* God had atrophied. What did friendship with God mean? Could God speak to me? Perhaps he just had?!



This encounter with God through meditation on Scripture, along with other such moments, was humbling and transformative. I turned for help to people who knew something about spiritual practices such as *Lectio Divina* (an ancient way to pray with Scripture), silence and solitude, and spiritual direction. Slowly the balance began to be restored between head and heart, though that is a journey that continues to challenge. As Thomas Merton observed, “Curiously ... those who constantly read the Bible as a matter of professional or

pious duty, can often manage to evade a radically involved dialogue with the book they are questioning.”<sup>1</sup>

Study and meditation are not mutually exclusive approaches to Scripture. Each enriches the other. Mastering the text exegetically is exciting and enriching. But it also allows me to remain in control.

Robert Mulholland argues, therefore, that we need approaches to Scripture that “persistently, perhaps painfully, pry us open to the recreating love of God.”<sup>2</sup> So I find it crucial to carve out times to be in meditative mode. Then I surrender control, and I am the one who is mastered, in an exegesis of the heart.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986), 24.

<sup>2</sup> M Robert Mulholland, “Spiritual Reading of Scripture,” *Weavings* 3, no. 6 (1988): 28.

## Cultivating a Biblical Imagination

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As we grapple to live redemptively in a wider culture, we must recover the richest (and truest) source of cultural expression available to us – the Bible. We need to read it for instruction so we can understand better, for formation so that we can live more faithfully, and

for imagination, so that springs of living water will flow out of our communities in all the forms of human culture, and renew society around us.

This is why the Bible is at the core of everything we teach at Laidlaw, and why we encourage every Christian – whether through formal study or not – to take up the challenge of cultivating a Biblical imagination.

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, 1964). See also James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, 2009), pp. 19–27.

<sup>2</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their friends* (London, 1981); Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (New York, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> See, Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination* (Downers Grove, 1979) and Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*.

<sup>4</sup> Or Star Wars, Star Trek, Harry Potter or other cultural franchise for that matter.

# A year in the Bible

Tekweni Chataira  
Master of Theology Student  
Co-Student President (Henderson)

At the start of this year National Principal Dr Roshan Allpress introduced the idea of basing our chapel services on the major themes of the biblical story – Creation through to New Creation. Once a month staff and students at the Henderson campus have put aside work and studies to gather in the library for a shared lunch followed by a chapel service.

These services have been a time of prayer, worship, communion and reflection. Different teams of staff and students contributed to organising the services, giving each a unique flavour. I was privileged to attend the whole series and was deeply moved as each service brought fresh perspectives on the different biblical themes and how they apply in our world today.

I vividly remember the 'Exile' chapel service which, ironically, we had around exam time. Drawing on the experiences of both Israel and Judah as they were taken into exile by the Assyrians and the Babylonians respectively, the focus turned to the current ongoing

refugee crisis. We were reminded of the challenges faced by those displaced from their countries because of war, persecution and violence, and their quest to find a secure place to call home in other nations while, often, still harbouring a deep longing for their homeland. During the service, tears were shed as it became evident that this crisis was not "out there somewhere" but had personally affected some of our students. I left that service thinking, 'How does Christ call us to respond to this?'

These services have prompted me to reflect on issues not normally on my radar. Bartholomew and Goheen encapsulate what I think is the heart behind our Chapel services: "For our lives to be shaped by the story of Scripture, we need to understand two things well: the biblical story is a compelling unity on which we may depend, and each of us has a place within that story."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 12.



If you are struggling to read the Bible and live out of its story, two simple books that are a good starting point are:

## ***Eat this Book*, Eugene Peterson**

The author of *The Message*, Peterson is a pastor who cares deeply about how people engage with God's Scriptures. *Eat this Book* is dedicated to the recovery of the discipline of "spiritual reading" – immersive, prayerful, Trinitarian, formative reading of the Bible. By reaching back to the tradition of *Lectio Divina*, Peterson will help you learn to love again the very reading of the Bible.

## ***The Hare and the Tortoise*, Andrew Shamy, Sam Bloore & Roshan Allpress**

This short book follows on from *The Insect and the Buffalo* – an introduction to the narrative of Scripture for those unfamiliar with the overall coherence and structures of the Bible. *The Hare and the Tortoise* combines a monthly Bible reading guide with simple suggested spiritual practices that are intended to foster faithfulness in the twenty-first century. Designed to help readers make connections between different parts of Scripture, and connect the different emphases of the Biblical narrative with their own lives, it is also an invitation to slow down, and read simply in a busy world.





# A 'lucky fellowe'

Dr Tim Meadowcroft  
Senior Lecturer – School of Theology

*'I will lift up my eyes to the hills... My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth'.* One of my early memories is of those words from Psalm 121, read to me and my brother and sister the night before we boarded the train for another term of boarding school in the foothills of the Pakistani Himalayas. The Bible reading habit formed in that mountain environment has remained with me ever since. Sometimes the experience has been dry or even lonely; at other times a duty-driven thing. Yet God is good and through my regular Bible reading God continues to ambush me with grace.

In the years since, my faith has matured and with it my understanding of the Bible. As a university student and then a high school English teacher, I learned to look for the truth of Scripture in every part of life, and in every academic discipline through which life could be studied.

Theological training and then Anglican parish ministry marked a new stage in my relationship with Scripture. During my studies I discovered the biblical languages. Through the study of Hebrew, in particular, I came to appreciate the vivid connectedness with everyday life of the God revealed through Jesus in the Bible. It was this connectedness that I strove to communicate in the practice of parish ministry in the farming and horticultural community in which we lived for four years. As a young man doubtful of my ability to offer anything pastorally to anyone, I discovered that the best resource available was to connect people with the Jesus to whom the Bible bears witness. At the same time, I was



regularly encouraged by Paul's advice to the young Timothy to "rekindle the gift of God within you". These words came and still come as if spoken directly to me.

Another outcome of my ministry training was a sense that the Bible was a vast frontier which beckoned me into a lifetime's exploration. That call has fuelled my sense of vocation ever since. From parish ministry, I was fortunate to spend three and half years in postgraduate study in Edinburgh, and now I find myself with nearly twenty-five years under my belt of teaching and research in biblical studies at Laidlaw College. This brings the joy of seeing others grow into a strong sense of the relevance of Scripture, both for themselves and for those to whom they will minister.

Here in Auckland, Rangitoto Island is tall and almost perfectly conical. It can be seen from many vantage points in the city and it always looks the same from whatever perspective it is viewed.

Rangitoto has become for me a metaphor of God as my still point in a turning and chaotic world, and when I open the Bible I am best able to reconnect with that still point. As one example of that, I recall living in a tenement flat in Scotland with four children and little money wondering if it was right to continue PhD studies; and will never forget the promise of God's care for me and my family in Ps. 147:7-11 long before the reality of that care materialised.

William Tyndale, who was responsible for the first translation of the Bible into English in the early 1500s, rendered Gen 39:21 thus: *"The Lord was with Joseph and he was a lucky fellowe"*. I thank God that I too have been a 'lucky fellowe'.

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