



Nazareth Letter September 2024  
In Praise of Reading Deeply

Dear Brothers and Sisters.

I want to write to you today about the beauty of reading and writing. It is something we may rarely give thanks for. Something we learnt at school and perhaps take for granted in an age of text messaging, and social media posts. I have always loved reading books but found myself often scrolling on my mobile phone or listening to audio books while falling asleep but never finding the time or concentration to sit down and lose myself in a book. I was prompted to think about the beauty of books, poetry and reading by our Autumn Lecture Programme last Monday on the theme of Inspiration and also by Pope Francis who has written a wonderful letter expressing the importance of literature in Christian formation. (A link to which I include in this letter)

In the past months and especially on holiday I have returned to the joy of reading. Reading and writing has a close link with meditation. When you read you cannot read and do something else at the same time. It calls upon you to focus on the words in front of you and to become present to them. At first, just as in meditation, your mind may find it hard to concentrate until the words begin to draw you in to the exclusion of all else. The very act of reading stills you, makes you present and perceptive and helps you to read not just the word but the world in which you live. It also brings the world into words. Reading calls upon us to become attentive to a world both within oneself but also beyond oneself. Paulo Freire the great liberation educationalists describes this process of reading the world so evocatively:

The texts, words, letters of that context were incarnated in the song of the birds — tanager, flycatcher, thrush; in the dance of boughs blown by the strong winds announcing storms; thunder and lightning; rain waters playing with geography: creating lakes, islands, rivers, streams. The texts, words, letters of that context were incarnated as well in the whistle of the wind, the clouds of the sky, the sky's colour, its movement; in the colour of foliage, the shape of leaves, the fragrance of flowers — roses, jasmine; in tree trunks; in fruit rinds: the varying colour tones of the same fruit at different times — the green of a mango when the fruit is first forming, the green of a mango fully formed, the greenish yellow of the same mango ripening, the black spots of an overripe mango — the relationship among these colours, the developing fruit, its resistance to our manipulation, and its taste.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire: *The Importance of the Act of Reading*.

I think this is a beautiful description of the world being made word.

I think of the words that have moved me, words that have taken root within me and whose story I have entered into bringing my own story, through the words I read into greater being.

Of course the most precious the words and actions of Christ himself. For in Christ it is not just the world being made word. But the Word being made flesh. I rejoice in the way week after week we have opened up these texts to our own lives through *Lectio Divina*. We have not only read these texts we have inhabited them and each one of us brought our own experiences and stories into Christ's story. We have allowed these texts to read us and in a very real way for the Word to become flesh- our flesh. And the wonderful thing about this way of reading scripture is that it is not just our voice but everybody who shares and adds to our understanding. Fiona MacMillan used the image when describing Nazareth as each one of us being a piece in the jigsaw although very different from one another in coming together we see the beauty of the bigger picture in which each person adds to the whole.

Our greatest need today is not for a disembodied faith with its rules and judgments- but rather an encounter with Jesus Christ- the Word made flesh, our flesh, made history, made us. Pope Francis talks about the importance of reading in the process of Christian formation. He writes “We must take care not to lose sight of the flesh of Jesus- words, passions, emotions, feelings, words that challenge and console, hands that touch and heal, relationships that liberate and encourage- flesh made of hospitality, forgiveness, imagination, fearlessness- in a word love.”<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis writes this: “Literature can greatly stimulate the free and humble exercise of our use of reason, a fruitful recognition of the variety of human languages, a broadening of our human sensibilities, and finally, a great spiritual openness to hearing the Voice that speaks through many voices.”<sup>3</sup>

Think of the books, poems and words that have touched you and encouraged you to grow through the experiences, cultures, images, insights and lives of others. CS Lewis wrote: “In reading literature I become a thousand men and women and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem ‘I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see’ Here as in worship, in love, in moral action and in knowing I transcend myself and am never more myself than when I do.” When we read, Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges writes- “We enter into the text not to fixate on ideas or critical command but to enter in and “listen to another person’s voice.”<sup>4</sup>

Think of the books you read as a child that gripped you: took you to different places. lands, times, relationships, adventures and characters that fired your imagination. I remember as a child entering a reading project at the local library where you had to read a book and then

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis: On the Role of Poetry and Literature in Formation. See: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240717-lettera-ruolo-letteratura-formazione.html>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

come back to the library to answer questions about the story and then were given a new book to read. I became so in love with these books that I remember one evening when I had been told to stay at home- escaping out of the window and running to the library so I could pick up my next book. How many of you, I wonder, can walk past a bookshop without wanting to enter, or read a book you loved without wanting to keep it near you. I have always loved libraries- the library on the sea front at Aberystwyth which stayed open late at night, where surrounded by books I could still hear the sound of the sea, or the National Library of Wales where they brought any book you requested to your desk and in the evening after reading a novel you came out onto the grand library steps with the whole of the Cardigan Bay stretched out before you feeling expanded and as though you could be anyone you wanted to be. Or the upstairs library at the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield where I had my own desk which I returned to again and again- it felt like a sanctuary, as holy as the church, the place of entry into the thoughts and images and words of others and discovering the beyond in the midst of our own lives. Or the London Library where I escape from St Martin's to read, to write and to be inspired through the gift of concentration. I have recently read books that have touched my heart so deeply they felt as though they were taking me to a sacred place and healing my own heart through the encounter with the lives of others. The words you read can tenderise you and open your life up. As I finish the book I often feel I know the people in it and long to be in their presence again for they had spoken to me so deeply. Or similarly love the author who has spoken to my soul.

I speak of these things because I feel deeply the need not for more and more clutter and fragmentation in our lives, not more simplistic judgments, stereo types, fake news of refugees eating the local cats and dogs but the space and the concentration to journey deeper. At the heart of our Nazareth calling is a call to a greater tenderness, sensitivity and openness to the lives of others, to the extraordinary wonder and power of the world in which we live from the mightiest of landscapes to the tinniest detail. From the power of a storm to the rain upon an eyelash. In a culture in which often the mystery of the world is reduced to dualistic polarities and binary choices- literature and poetry can help us discover the infinite wonder of our lives. It is a chance to open the doors of our souls- dissolving simple judgements in the discovery of many voices, many languages, multi-variant meaning, many ways of seeing and understanding and loving. Reading can broaden our sensibilities, lead us through struggle and despair, touch our hearts, open our eyes, expand our souls. Empathy is essential to our Christian journey- to be able to see the world through others eyes and experience the world through the flesh of another is I believe about learning what it means to be human with all its trials and struggles, pitfalls and miracles. Pope Francis writes: "Those who truly learn to see draw close to what is unseen" In our Nazareth Rule of Life two of our promises call upon us to read and contemplate: Scripture and also Sabbath Time where reading can be the means of replenishment but in truth reading deeply enriches all our promises.

You see I feel it is a failure of empathy if we can see the suffering of a child be it Palestinian or Jew, Ukrainian, Congolese, or Londoner and not recognise and feel that suffering as if it could be our own child. Or see the joy of another without celebrating that joy in our own heart as our own. Great books not only expand our inner lives- they can show us the way to express our own lives too. I am writing to you my brothers and sisters having spent a lot of

my last two weeks holiday reading novels and feeling enriched by the life of the imagination, so much so that I too have longed to write and share with you, which is what I am doing now.

Blessings

Revd Richard Carter

**For the reader:**

**Notes On The Art Of Poetry by Dylan Thomas**

I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on  
in the world between the covers of books,  
such sandstorms and ice blasts of words,  
such staggering peace, such enormous laughter,  
such and so many blinding bright lights,  
splashing all over the pages  
in a million bits and pieces  
all of which were words, words, words,  
and each of which were alive forever  
in its own delight and glory and oddity and light.

**From a writer to his readers.**

**Where My Books Go by William Butler Yeats**

ALL the words that I utter,  
And all the words that I write,  
Must spread out their wings untiring,  
And never rest in their flight,  
Till they come where your sad, sad heart is,  
And sing to you in the night,  
Beyond where the waters are moving,  
Storm-darken'd or starry bright.

Bible Reading

Corinthians 13

The Gift of Love

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an

adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

#### Wonderings

I wonder if you can remember a book you read as a child that you loved

I wonder if you have ever read a book or a poem that has transformed you

I wonder if you could recommend a book to a member of Nazareth Community what book you would choose.

I wonder how reading or poetry or art has taught you more about faith, hope and love.

I wonder if you write and if you don't, I encourage you to try, a simple journal or note book can help you record the experiences of God's blessing.