

The Living Word

Preached on the Second Sunday in Advent
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
December 6, 2020
Text: Rom. 15: 4-13

Let us look at our collect for the Second Sunday in Advent again:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This Collect was an original composition by Abp. Thomas Cranmer for the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 and is probably the best-known of the BCP collects. Because of this Collect, the Second Sunday in Advent is often known as “Bible Sunday” in Anglican circles. When Anglicans talk about the discipline of Scripture reading, we often use the Collect’s five verbs (hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest) as a good rubric for using the Bible in our daily life:

Additionally, notice the goal of our discipline to immerse ourselves in Scripture: “that we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which [God] has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.” Our Epistle reading for today speaks of these things as well:

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Rom. 15: 4-7)

St. Paul begins the passage by showing that Scripture instructs us, strengthens us, and encourages us that we would have hope in the Promises of God. He prays that God would use that strengthening and encouragement to bear fruit in harmonious living among Christians. That is, that the God would use the Scriptures to build Christian community. Why? So that we would worship God together in that community. You see, the point of Scripture isn’t only head knowledge, though knowledge is certainly important. No, we need to know Scripture so that we can be transformed by it, to really learn Who God is, and so to learn who we are and who we should be, both individually and corporately. If the Church is not built up through our immersion in the Word, then reading the Bible becomes a mere individualistic hobby. The Scriptures never promote this “me ‘n’ my Bible” approach to the faith. We are not to study the Bible to see what

we can make of it, but to see what it makes of us. And this is best done when we read the Bible “with the Church”, taking advantage of what various saints, past and present have had to say about it, as well as others who have gone farther in their walk with the Lord than us.

Getting the Scripture into the hands of all Christians was the number one priority for our English Reformers. Even under the reign of Henry VIII (who was no friend of the Reformers’ theology, just their politics), an English Bible was to be placed in every parish church so that all the people would have access to it, regardless of their means. The Prayer Book’s simplification of the Monastic Offices into daily Morning and Evening Prayer for the entire community allowed for the daily and systematic reading and hearing of Scripture in the context of public worship. In the Preface to the Great Bible, Abp. Cranmer says that this was to be a return to the ancient pattern that we saw in the Church Fathers. Indeed, we have so many of the homilies of St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine because their habit was to systematically read the bible and preach to their people every single day. And their students would write down these sermons word-for-word. Even when the majority of the laity were illiterate, Christians were always a “people of the Book.” This is why the first Homily in our Anglican Book of Homilies was Cranmer’s “A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture in Two Parts.”

In the first part, we’re told of the benefits of being immersed in Scripture. Take, for example, this passage:

These books therefore ought to be much in our hands, in our eyes, in our ears, in our mouths, but most of all in our hearts. For the Scripture of God is the heavenly meat of our souls: the hearing and keeping of it maketh us blessed, sanctifieth us, and maketh us holy: it turneth our souls: it is a light lantern to our feet: it is a sure, steadfast, and everlasting instrument of our salvation: it giveth wisdom to the humble and lowlyhearted: it comforteth, maketh glad, cheereth, and cherisheth our consciences: it is a more excellent jewel or treasure than any gold or precious stone: it is more sweet than honey or honeycomb: it is called the best part, which Mary did choose; for it hath in it everlasting comfort.

Cranmer goes on to discuss how God uses Scripture to bring us to everlasting life, to turn our hearts through God’s promises, and how the Scriptures will be the basis of how we are judged before the Lord. When we think about today’s Gospel, St. Luke’s account of the End Times or Apocalypse, this last part is particularly important, and indeed is a major focus of Advent: Christ will indeed come again to judge the living and the dead. We therefore ought to be diligently in the Scriptures so that we might know God’s word, both as Law and Gospel, and respond to Him accordingly.

If we’re honest, though, it can be strangely difficult at times to be diligent in Scripture. Besides our laziness or distractedness, there is an element of spiritual warfare here. After all, in the Parable of the Sower, Our Lord tells us that the Devil likes to come

and snatch the Word away lest it bear fruit. Often our hearts are not the good soil they need to be. The good news is that God's Word is often the very plow needed to till up the stones, break up the path, and uproot those weeds.

In the second part of the Homily on Scripture reading, Abp. Cranmer answers two common objections of his day that both boiled down to the same excuse: "Scripture is too hard." The first person says that since Scripture is so hard, they "dare not read holy Scripture, lest through their ignorance they should fall into any error." The other person says that Scripture is so hard that it should be left to be read by clergy and scholars, but not the regular layperson.

To the first person, our Homily says that since ignorance of Scripture is the cause of all spiritual error, the best cure for ignorance is to read Scripture! Do you want to avoid error? Get to know the Bible! But how do we read the Bible so as to avoid the error? Cranmer says, "Read it humbly with a meek and lowly heart; to the intent that you may glorify God, and not yourself, with the knowledge of it." And of course, read it prayerfully, asking God to direct the reading and help with understanding. That sort of prayer is almost always answered with a "yes."

What about the second person? What about the excuse that Scripture is so hard we cannot trust regular folk to understand it? Well, we do see that Scripture includes many things that are difficult and require careful and expert study. After all, there's a reason prospective clergy should go to school for several years! That said, there are also many, many things that are very easy to understand, many things that are, in fact, simple. Our Homily says, "he that is so weak that he is not able to brook strong meat, yet he may suck the sweet and tender milk, and defer the rest until he wax stronger and come to more knowledge." In other words, start with the easy stuff and work up to the hard stuff. And by all means, talk to trusted clergy, professors, and teachers if you find something difficult. That's why God gave teachers and pastors to the church: to foster growth in his people. Do you remember the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts? While reading Isaiah, he knew there was something important in the text, but he didn't understand it. God sent St. Phillip to him to teach him how the passage points to Jesus. The Eunuch was baptized and brought the gospel back to the court of the Queen. And that's how Ethiopia became one of the first Christian nations, according to some of our earliest Church historians.

But what about us today? For some of us, the issue of Scripture's difficulty is indeed a hindrance, and hopefully the good Archbishop's advice helps. But for most of us, the bigger barrier may one of time. We're just so busy, that it can be hard to be diligent in our reading and study of Scripture. But you may be surprised by how little time one really needs in the Scripture. Indeed, as little as 15 minutes a day will get you through the entire Bible in about a year. But to put it into greater perspective, there is a great infographic from Crossway published a few years ago. The post showed how much time is needed to read each book of the Bible. Listen to some of these statistics:

- The average time needed to read a book of the Old Testament is 41 minutes.
- Only 5 books are more than three hours long, and none exceed 4 hours.

- 20 of the 39 books in the Old Testament take less than an hour to read.
- 14 of them take less than half an hour to read.
- For the New Testament, things are even easier. Only the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation take more than an hour to read. None take more than two and a half hours.
- 17 of the 27 books in the New Testament take less than half an hour to read.
- 12 of them take less than 15 minutes.

So, let this be an encouragement to “take up and read,” as St. Augustine was told at his conversion. You can use the Daily Offices as the vehicle for this or some other plan. If reading poses particular difficulties, you can listen to the Bible through just about any Bible app. However you are able, whether through larger spans of time, or in 15 minute chunks, please avail yourselves of this opportunity. And always do so with a mind to see our Lord Jesus, to gain strength for your Christian walk, and to know our God and King better and better for our edification and His glory.

In the Name...