

The epistle lesson this morning begins with the sentence, "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." This verse is the primary source for the beginning of the collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, also known as Bible Sunday. We have here an entire Sunday, which we repeat annually at the beginning of the Church year, in which we focus upon the blessing of the Scripture. A wise preacher proclaimed from this very pulpit last year, "Many things could be said about Anglicanism, but let it not be said that the Anglican church is not a Bible church." And this morning, I re-echo those words.

God has given us His written Word as He wants us to have it, and we assert that it is the primary rule for and foundation of our faith. We assert that it is reliable, and that it is unerring and infallible. The reason we assert this is that Jesus Christ is the Word incarnate, and He alone establishes and assures to us the Word written. As the Gospel states today, "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away." Yes, some will suggest that this only applies to the words spoken by Christ Himself. But Christ is the Word. The bodily revelation of God to mankind is not to be divorced from the written revelation of God to mankind.

Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles, entitled "Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation," puts it this way:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation

Certainly scripture reveals to us the way for mankind to return to God. But as we see in the Epistle, it is much more than just a recipe to be saved. The message of salvation is not merely "do X, Y, and Z, and you are good to go." It is not primarily about escaping from hell, though through our faith in Christ, we do avoid that dreadful fate. No, we must not think that we get baptized, and then confirmed, and then can ignore God or His Church without consequence. God will not be used like this.

Rather we understand that salvation is about admission to the very presence of God, both now in the time of this mortal life, in which The Son, Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; and in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both

the quick and the dead. By His grace and His grace only we shall enter into the life immortal; being in the presence of God, we shall be united with Him. And in that union, our deepest longings will be satisfied.

That is our ultimate destiny as followers of Christ. But union with God isn't just for the new heavens and the new earth. As mentioned above, salvation is for now. The Holy Scripture, the Bible, forms and shapes us now, giving us a foretaste of the life for which we are destined. How does scripture do this? Let us look again at the lesson from the 15th chapter of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans.

First, we note that the written Word was given for our learning. And this sentiment is repeated in St. Paul's Second Letter to Timothy at the end of Chapter 2. "All Scripture is God-breathed [or inspired: in-Spirited] and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." So God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, gave us this revelation of Himself. We call this "special revelation," for it is God directly revealing His mind and His plan for creation through language. The other revelation that we have from God about Himself is called "general revelation," which is what we know about God through what He has made. The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth His handiwork. In this 2nd Timothy passage, we see that the inspired Word of God is given to form us in various ways for our equipping to live sanctified lives here and now.

I am very grateful that our lectionary makes provision for us to pause annually and consider the gift we have in the Bible. And in considering this gift, we may realize to our shame that we do not study it enough. Our collect calls us to listen to scripture and to read it, to mark it, or in other words, to heed it, and to apply it to our lives. We are called to learn it or to memorize it and become intimately familiar with it. Finally we are called to inwardly digest it. This is a peculiar expression, for we think of digesting food for our bodies instead of revelation for our souls, but the point is that we are to meditate upon God's written testimony of Himself to us. If we do not heed the collect's admonition, if we neglect to take Holy Scripture into ourselves, then we will not be formed, we will not be equipped, we will not be sanctified nearly as deeply as we could be.

Now, I wager that all of us here would admit that we do not spend enough time with scripture actually learning it, memorizing it, meditating upon it. Yet this is the most direct way

that we understand who God is, the extent of His love for us, and how we are to appropriately call for and respond to His grace. But let us not permit our tepid passion for God's Word permanently discourage us. In this new year, recommit to prioritizing the study of scripture. At the very least, carve out 10 minutes a day to let your mind be renewed through God's Word. Read for 5 minutes and then think about and pray about what you have read for 5 minutes. There is no rush in this activity. There is no prize to be had by finishing a book or a chapter quickly. The prize is to be had by deeply learning about God through His self-revelation. Let holy scripture rest in your mind and in your soul. Let it shape you, form you, and sanctify you.

Now learning scriptures for its own sake is reward enough, but in the epistle lesson the apostle continues with this, "that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." So secondly we note that the study of scripture requires, and therefore develops in us, patience. Learning the Bible is not something that can be rushed, but requires an intentionality over time. It is a spiritual discipline. And as with all spiritual disciplines, the study of scripture is not entered into merely for its own sake. Familiarity with the scriptures is not about winning at trivial pursuit. We exercise for the benefit of the body. Likewise, we engage in spiritual exercises, or spiritual disciplines, for the spiritual benefit that it brings. Patience grows through a dedication to the study of God's Holy Word.

Now patience is a virtue and is valuable in itself. But one is not patient without a promise. We go to the doctor's office and wait patiently in the waiting room expecting that eventually the doctor will see us. We don't go to the doctor's office and wait patiently and then leave without seeing the doctor, unless we have a very rude doctor. Patience is the ability to wait contentedly, but patience also has a goal. Likewise, we followers of Christ have a goal, and that is to be with Christ, to be with the Godhead, into eternity. In learning scripture, we are therefore confirmed in our hope that this will be our blessed end.

Opposite to this, is anxiety caused by doubt. When we cut ourselves off from God by neglecting His Table, His People, and most particularly for us this morning, His Word, we begin to question and doubt the truth of our salvation and the reality and goodness of God. We lose our connection to God. But as we've discussed, St. Paul says that the scriptures were written for our learning, and in the learning of them, our patience grows through the discipline of study, but also in the greater confidence which that study certifies.

Thirdly therefore in this passage, we note that learning God's Word more firmly establishes both in our minds and in our hearts, the blessed hope that we have in all of the promises of God. What are these promises? They can be summarized in that we are reunited to God through the atoning work of Christ, and that in being thus redeemed, we will also be restored to a greater state of perfection and glory. The Bible, the written Word of God, is the foundation of this hope.

Continuing in the epistle, we also see fourthly that a commitment to the veracity of scripture and to the discipline of its study, brings us another blessing – that we, as brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, become more closely joined to each other. This happens because our understanding of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, matures and converges. St. Paul prays that those to whom he is writing would be characterized by a singleness of mind, and that along with this likeminded-ness, our praises and prayers would together arise to God, glorifying Him with a singleness of voice. Many members all become a single body. Many individuals, united in one heart and one mind, praise God with one united voice. And in the unity of the family of God, we then freely extend the hospitality of God to each other. We have been freely and warmly received by Christ, let us freely and warmly receive each other, as well as welcoming those outside of the Church to participate with us, and God willing to eventually be united with us in the bond of Christ's love.

This pericope of scripture then concludes with St. Paul assuring his readers that the Bible is indeed trustworthy: scripture faithfully foretells of Jesus Christ, who first ministered to the Jewish people (noted as "the circumcision" in the text), and also then extended the promises of God beyond the Jews to the rest of the peoples of the earth. The Jews were blessed in that God chose them to be His particular people to bring forth the Messiah, Jesus, into the world. But the salvation won by Christ was not limited to Christ's early tribe, the Jews. Christ's salvation was for all humanity, and this fact was not a surprise to the Bible. Paul points to a few of the passages that prophecy of Christ and the salvation that He would bring to both Jew and Gentile. In Christ, all humanity is one. The written Word of God bears comprehensive witness to the entire ministry of the Incarnate Word of God.

The results for us? Comfort and joy. Peace and hope. Be assured today of the Word of God. Recommit to its study, for it reveals to us the very being of God. And further, the learning of scripture develops in us patience and establishes to us the hope of union with Christ in this world and in the world to come. And being united to Christ, we are therefore more fully

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united in the bond of Christian love to each other.

Yes, the Word is revealed to us in the Word, and therefore let us not despise either. What a gift we have in the Bible. May we earnestly treasure it. How best should we do this? Dive into the Bible for yourselves, and hear the voice of God mediated to us by the Spirit of God. May you hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest Holy Scripture. May it dwell with you richly. May it encourage your hearts as it enlightens and sanctifies your thoughts and your imaginations.

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen