

Because of our readings and collect this morning, the second Sunday of Advent is known as “Bible Sunday”. It perhaps seems strange that we would focus upon the Bible during this season of the year so it is worth first asking why this is. To answer this, let begin by recalling the message to us last week. Now is the night far spent and the day is at hand. Therefore cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Christ is coming. It is our duty to prepare. The time is now.

This leads us to the message that the church has for us today, this Second Sunday of the season of preparation. Today we are given the message, loudly and clearly, that we are to prepare for Christ through the written Word of God, the Bible. We are to prepare ourselves to receive the Incarnate Word through the Holy Spirit inspired Written Word.

Ok, yes. This is good. But what does this practically mean for us? How are we to employ the Word in order to prepare for the coming of Christ? To answer this, let us first look to our collect. It reads:

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 hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

This is a great and famous prayer precisely because of that string of verbs. “Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest (all holy Scripture).” Hearing the Word is taking it into ourselves audibly, through our ears. We Anglicans persistently, insistently, speak the holy scriptures out audibly in our worship. It is, after all, the Word of God. It is God’s message naturally given us through speech and received by hearing.

We also take the Word into ourselves through reading. This means both by reading along with the spoken Word, but also in personal and devotional reading, where the text is not necessarily vocalized, but enters into our minds through our eyes. Framed differently, both hearing and reading the Word of God is about getting the text into us through our bodies, our senses, so that our minds can apprehend the ideas that God wishes us to know. In general, we wish to employ all of our bodily senses in order to receive God's Word into our cognitive and imaginative capacities.

Although we may most readily associate the verb, "To mark," with the idea of literally highlighting texts in our Bibles, we also should not limit this verb to our modern notion of highlighting or underlining. Rather, this more generally means that we should pay close attention to the Word of God, making sure that we comprehend what is being said at a surface level and then also relating all the various passages we remember to each other.

We are forbidden by logic and by the Church to interpret or understand passages of God's Word in isolation with the rest of Scripture. Article VII states, "The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man." Similarly Article XX states, "... it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another." Considering this, it may be said that we are a Whole Scripture Church. We read all of Scripture, we value the Holy Bible – all of it – as the Word of God, and thus, we must pay close heed to all of it. We must mark all of it, understanding it as the single, unified message, of God's revelation of Himself to humanity.

Learning Scripture means that not only do we pay attention to the text on the page, but we

spend time meditating upon the meaning of it and applying it to our experiences.

Importantly it also means committing that text to memory, which is something that I can confidently assert that we do not spend enough effort doing. We need to expend focused study upon the Word of God if we really desire to really know it.

Now I would never say that elevating the importance of Scripture in our lives is a bad thing, but we should not miss the goal here. We don't listen to or read scripture as merely a mental exercise, or to win at trivial pursuit, or to feel pride at our superior knowledge. We study scripture so that we would know God. For in it, the Creator of the universe reveals Himself to mankind, particularly by revealing Himself to us in Christ. The Written Word of God helps us to better know, to better become more like the human person of the Eternal Trinity, Jesus Christ, The Word of God Incarnate.

This brings us to that last verb in today's collect. We pray that we would inwardly digest the Word of God. We pray that we would eat it, that our souls would nourish themselves upon Scripture so that we ourselves would become the Word, so that we would be like Jesus. We want the mind and character of God to become knit to every cell of our bodies and to fill every corner of our souls. This is how we prepare for Christ's coming through the Word. This is the practical activity of training our minds to think like God and our souls to be like God, shaped by Christ's love for us and formed to have greater love for Christ.

Well, that sounds easy enough.

If only

Of course there are three elephants in the room which we are neglecting – that is the world, the flesh, and the devil. All of these are aligned to distract us from the blessing that we have

in God's Word and from the Spiritual growth, the Spiritual preparedness, that is to be found therein. We are not to be daunted by these, but let us also not make the opposite error in thinking that preparedness happens easily without concerted effort.

Living according to the Christian faith is not for the fainthearted. Learning The Bible, The Word of God requires a lifetime of discipline and focus. But then, nothing that is really worthwhile is ever easy, right? The long road to godliness is itself the means to godliness. We must therefore take a long view of this endeavor, but, as we mentioned last week, pursue it with a sense of urgency, not panic mind you, but also not without a clear intentionality. You will not notice improvement week to week, but you will notice it over years and decades.

But such a long task leaves us open to discouragement, especially if one misunderstands the nature of the journey. We prayed in the collect, "... that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ." In this prayer we pray for patience. Why? Because none of us wants to put in the effort, do the work, follow in the close steps of Christ, that we as Christians are called / required to do. We prayed for patience because we need patience in learning the Word of God. There are no shortcuts. There is only the life of faith, lived moment by moment.

At the same time, we also prayed for the comfort of God's Holy Word. In other words, the task of learning the Word of God itself provides the encouragement to persevere until the end. When we truly and consistently hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word of God, then we receive the comfort of His Word, we receive encouragement from what we learn, our faith is better established. The long road to godliness is itself the means to godliness, but it is also the means of encouragement. Knowing The Word of God is a joy. They are the means whereby we learn of Christ and comprehend God's plan of redemption.

In them we discover God's love for us in Christ, God's faithfulness to His Word, and so many more things that establish and confirm us in the faith. We are able to cry out with David in the Psalm this morning:

18 Open thou mine eyes; * that I may see the wondrous things of thy law.

20 My soul breaketh out for the very fervent desire * that it hath always unto thy judgments.

24 For thy testimonies are my delight, * and my counsellors.

Let us also not merely think that this is just an intellectual exercise. It is not. It is handling and contending with the deep mysteries of God that He has graciously deigned to reveal to us. We forget what a treasure we have in the Holy Scripture because it seems to be always readily at hand. It is almost too abundant in our lives, and thus we take it for granted. We don't feel pressured to dig as deeply and fervently into it, for Bible reading isn't the scarce resource that it once was, but ... it isn't actually practiced either. Opening the Bible is extremely special considering what we are reading – God's very message to a lost humanity for the salvation of the world. Let us always struggle to value it as such.

We have our human approach to life, but this leads us to disaster. What we need is God's mind to be in us as we engage with our daily tasks. His mind and His thoughts reframe our perspectives and re-prioritize our values. As we read in Isaiah 55 verses 8 and 9:

"For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts, Nor *are* your ways My ways," says the LORD.

"For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

We need to see the world through the mind of God. For this we need to be shaped by the Word of God.

Finally, let us reaffirm that, not only is The Bible a source of comfort and joy in the midst of

our long journey, not only is it an incredibly great privilege given to us, revealing God's very mind, but it is also true. It is also trustworthy. What God intends His Word to accomplish, will, in fact be accomplished. His Word cannot be thwarted or broken. It is the ultimately trustworthy source of knowledge because its source is not fallen humanity, but divinity. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, in The Word itself.

Continuing in Isaiah 55, we read:

"For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, And do not return there,
But water the earth, And make it bring forth and bud,
That it may give seed to the sower And bread to the eater,
11 So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent
it.

Also in the epistle lesson, St. Paul refers to many prophecies which foretell the blessings of the Gentiles, that they would be grafted into the worshiping people of God. The prophecies were fulfilled by God in Christ working through The Apostles. God's Word is True. It will not fail.

Finally we read in the gospel this morning, Christ Himself says, "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away." The Word of God endures forever. The Word of God safeguarded by the Church is the foundation upon which we must build our lives.

In this season of Advent, let us prepare to receive our Redeemer. Let us prepare to receive our King and Judge. Let us recommit once again, to love the Word of God by hearing it, reading it, marking it, learning it, and inwardly digesting it. So that by patient study through our lives and by the comfort received in God's Holy Word, we would indeed ever hold fast to the eternal life given us in Christ.

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The Second Sunday of Advent

K. Bartel, 7

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.