

## Advent 2

I take as my text today the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent:

***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....***

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight O’ Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Collects are often a great inspiration for sermons. That is the case for this, the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, which has inspired Anglicans everywhere to celebrate this Sunday as ***Bible Sunday***.

Historically, the Bible was just being written, that is, the ***New Testament***, at the time of St. Paul’s letter to the Church at Rome; yet, the passage we read today further supports the petition in today’s Collect:

***Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them***

Both the Collect and the Epistle passage have as a basis that the reading of Holy Scripture is necessary to understanding the relationship of God towards man, and the understanding of Christian duties and doctrine.

The Collect, written by Archbishop Cranmer for the 1549 Prayer Book, emphasizes Cranmer's conviction that all the scriptures should be read. This he expressed eloquently in his **Preface** to the 1549 Prayer Book, much too long to be read here.

Under the guidance of Cranmer, the 1549 Prayer Book set out an orderly schedule, a Lectionary, for reading nearly the entire Bible over the course of the year.

If we use the Lectionary and read the ***Daily Offices*** of Morning and Evening Prayer, we can easily accomplish the goal of reading almost all the Bible in one year, and the Psalter every month.

When we come face-to-face with the evolution of the Bible, how the writings were all brought together to form the Canon of Scripture, the question of which came first, the Church or the Bible becomes moot. Most emphatically, the Bible is a product of the Church, not the other way around, contrary to the thinking of many Christians since the Reformation.

Indeed, early Christians, convinced that the end was near and the Second Coming of Christ eminent, saw little, if any need, for a written record concerning Jesus Christ. Yet, by the end of the first century, all the books of the *New Testament* were already written, with the Gospel of John being, perhaps, the last.

With the second century, less than a hundred years after the Ascension, a movement began within the Christian community to provide a collective written testimony of Jesus Christ, a witness to His Ministry. We have evidence from Justin Martyr, writing about 150 A.D. that the *Memoirs of the Apostles* and the *Prophets* of the *Old Testament* were read on the Lord's Day.

By the end of the second century, the Syriac version of the *New Testament* was in existence and contained all the books of our *New Testament*, with just a few exceptions; and there were, likewise, at about the same time, compilations in the West.

Eusebius tells us, writing in 325, that the books of the *New Testament* had been divided into three classes: those which were authoritative, those whose authority was disputed, and spurious books, among which were various apocalypses and Gnostic Gospels, many of which have been lost.

Finally, in 397, the *New Testament*, the *Canon of Scripture*, as we know it today was formalized at the *Third Council of Carthage*.

But what is the significance of the Bible; what is its chief value; what does it mean to us today?

Theologians and academics have explored the Bible for centuries; volumes have been written; innumerable commentaries have been put forth; hardly a verse of the *Scriptures* has escaped scrutiny; yet, there are some relatively simple answers to these questions.

First, the **significance** of the Bible is that it is a record of God's revelation of Himself in history.

Second, its **chief value** is that it shows us what God is like and what He has done.

And third, it is a **living, present-day revelation to us of God's word**; it becomes an instrument through which God speaks to us as a Church and as individuals.

*Holy Scripture* reveals God to us. He is personal, with us as His children created *in His image*.

And *Holy Scripture* reveals God's unfailing love for us.

*Holy Scripture* is, in a sense, a divine love story through which God's unfailing love for us is continually revealed, his true *Nature* revealed, and we begin to see for ourselves that God truly is *Love*.

From the molding of his *Chosen People* in the *Old Testament* to the fulfillment of *Prophecy* in the *New Testament* with the salvation of mankind brought about through the Messiah, *Holy Scripture* chronicles God's love for all of his creation, culminating in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ

God speaks to us through the Bible, which makes it the living, inspired *Word of God*. By that, we mean that the Bible contains the communication of the truth about God and His purposes for the world. The Bible is *God's Word* in the sense that His message to us is contained in the Bible.

If the Bible is *God's Word*, then, indeed, it must be an inspired book. But it is not inspired in the same sense in which great literature is inspired, though there is a relationship of terms.

Most specifically when speaking of the Bible as inspired, the Church does not mean that God essentially dictated every word.

First, we can say the Bible is inspired because it has an inspired story to tell, not just of a group of people or a nation, but a story in which God is the principal actor.

Secondly, it is the faith of the Church that God the Holy Spirit has presided over the writing of the Bible in such fashion as to prevent distortion by human misunderstanding in that process. Throughout its growth and preservation, He has watched over it so that it is a trusted record of His revelation — truly, the Bible IS the faith of the Church.

The Bible was written by real, very human, people, just as fallible as we are; but that is what makes the Bible so warm and human. God did not overpower these authors; rather He made use of their natural human qualities, exerting a gentle influence that served to guide their work, so that the total picture would be undistorted and that nothing essential would be omitted.

We tend to think of the Bible in two divisions — the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament* — the *Old Testament* looking forward to a redemption yet to come; and the *New Testament* looking back on a redemption already accomplished.

Linking the two is the *Apocrypha*, not contained in all Bibles, as the Christian Church has not been entirely in agreement on their status as books of the Bible.

The *New Testament*, not unlike the *Old*, is a collection of writings which fall into four divisions: the Gospels, or accounts of the life of Jesus; the Acts of the Apostles, which is a history of the early *Apostolic Church*; the Epistles or letters of Paul, John, Peter, and James; and the Apocalypse, or Book of Revelation.

While a collection of writings, the *New Testament* bears a unified witness to one fact: the revealing of God to man in the person of Jesus Christ, who has completed the revelation of God and the redemption of mankind begun with the *Old Testament*, and is the means by which we may be saved.

The Bible is the *living Word of God*, for it speaks *directly to the heart and conscience of every individual in every age*.

For the early Christian, *Holy Scripture* was the *Old Testament*; for us today, it is the entire Bible, *Old and New Testaments*, the heart of which is the **Gospel of Jesus Christ**, through Whom the promises given to the ancient Hebrews have been fulfilled, and through Whom we are reconciled to our Father in heaven.

We see the *Old Covenant* — *Covenant* is a term frequently used interchangeably with *Testament* — we see the *Old Covenant* centered around the *Law*, and the *New Covenant*, or *Testament*, centered around *Love*: the *Old Covenant of the Law*, fulfilled in Jesus Christ; the *New Covenant of Love*, sealed in His Blood.

God's Love, his very *Nature*, is made manifest in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who brings to us the *Good News: God is Love*.

Because of that *Love*, we have been set free from the bondage of sin and evil; we have been given the heritage of eternal life through adoption.

We are little children. St. John had it right when he referred to us, we Christians, as little children.

That is what we are through the *Grace of God*, his little Children. And, as we explore the *Holy Scriptures*, we begin the process of spiritual maturation, in which, as the true *Nature* of God is revealed to us, we evolve into the image of God; not that we will accomplish that evolution in this life, but that we begin the journey.

It is a journey like no other: a journey from life, here and now, to life eternal.

And *Holy Scripture* provides a road map for our journey, guiding us along the difficult, often treacherous path, and inspiring us onward.

Now, in this present time, as we make our journey, we look forward to the yearly celebration of our beginning, the *First Coming of Jesus the Christ*, while we, at the same time, focus on *His Second Coming*, assured that the love first revealed in *Holy Scripture* will be fulfilled in that final day of *Judgment*, in that day when we reach the end of our journey in time, and enter into life eternal.