

**Holy Scripture**  
The Second Sunday in Advent  
(From the Collect & Epistle: Romans xv.4.)

*Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear, 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.*

*WHATSOEVER things were written aforetime, were written for our learning; that we, through patience, and comfort of the Scriptures, might have hope... 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.*

Today's Collect contains a famous injunction about the importance of Bible study. It breaks down exposure to the Scriptures into five specific actions: *hearing* them, *reading* them, *marking* them, *learning* them, and *inwardly digesting* them. Considering this Collect may help differentiate us from that class of people who, in reply to that innocent question: "Do you have a Bible?", answer: "Oh sure. I have a Bible sitting right on the shelf where I can always see it!"

But "seeing" the Bible is not even part of today's list! Even my parents, who were atheists, had a Bible in their book collection which no one ever looked at. I remember thumbing through its mysterious pages every so often, wondering why a whole portion of it would be written about "employment" (Job), and why other portions merely had first names attached to them that could even have been the names of my friends (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, James, Peter etc.). To me, it was all an uncomfortable puzzle which seemed of great interest and importance to many other children and their families, but to me, a strange, incomprehensible sort of text which made me feel uneasy.

But it seems odd to the extreme that for many even claiming to be Christians, the Black Book gathers more dust than it does attention. Our Collect, however, refuses to allow us to leave it alone. It can never be for us a mere coffee-table decoration; we are enjoined to become actively involved with it.

**I.** First, we are to *hear* holy Scriptures. Well, I hear lots of things, but many of them I completely tune out. This phrase can't simply mean the physical act of hearing. I am reminded of Jesus' unforgettable and oft repeated expression: *He who has ears to hear, let him hear!* The hearing necessary for interaction with the Bible is far deeper than merely receiving sound waves. It is "hearing with the heart", in other words, considering God's Word seriously, closely, and conscientiously. It means exposing oneself to it, in all of one's vulnerability, in spite of fear, and one's in-

stinct for self-preservation. Refusing to be lazy about the *way* that we hear it. Not allowing ourselves the dangerous luxury of giving it only half our attention. Passing it off as we would anything else we read of far, far less importance. This kind of hearing means letting the words enter into our deepest parts, for better or worse, to do their intended job there. It involves the same kind of trust and submission that we offer to medical experts when we sit on an exam table waiting for an intrusive, even embarrassing procedure of some kind. We cannot afford to greet God's words with any less significance than this.

**II.** We are to *read* them. Once again, is it the mere act of letting our eyes pass over the words? How many times have I sat there, half asleep, some book in my lap, reading the same words over and over, without comprehension? More Bible verses come to mind here. Moses chided Israel in his farewell sermon with these words:

*Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day.*

Deut. 29:4

Jesus rebuked a smug church congregation in this manner:

*I counsel you to... anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.* (Rev. 3:18)

Reading means "reading with the heart". Just as with the hearing, it is a very special kind of sensory encounter with Scripture that involves allowing what would otherwise be mere words to interact with the deepest portion of our being. This requires effort and concentration and discipline. And as with hearing, it includes an act of trustful submission, placing ourselves in a receptive posture to receive whatever sort of direct action God might wish to bring to bear upon us through the medium of His Word. This is no option. It is the only guarantee for spiritual health. To fail to follow through with this invites spiritual illness.

**III.** We are to *mark* them. Many of us have seen thoroughly marked up Bibles, filled with underlines, marginal notes, high-lighted sections, and pencilled-in references. I remember hearing with a bit of amusement and puzzlement an individual exclaim indignantly that such brazen writing in one's Bible is next to blasphemy. How, after all, could anyone dare to mark up the Holy Book? But even if one prefers not to write in the Bible, *marking* it could still mean taking very specific note of verses, passages, concepts, points of inspiration, that have appealed to us, or struck us somehow. Some of us have actually felt as if God Himself had given us, at a certain moment, a verse or a chapter that spoke directly to some pressing need. It was just as if He were actually talking to us. What other book invites such active interaction? What other text should be taken so seriously that we should make such an effort to mark it? I remember seeing a bumper sticker which said something like this: "If your Bible isn't falling apart, then I know why your life *is* falling apart!"

**IV.** We are to *learn* them. Learning means repetition. Isn't there a saying of this sort: "Repetition is the mother of learning"? Any skill is gained by repetition. It is also the key to familiarity. We know our phone numbers by constant use. We remember that new street address by returning to it constantly. We find our way at night in complete darkness out of our rooms and down the hall because we've done it so many times.

*-Uphold my steps in Your paths, That my footsteps may not slip. (Ps. 17:5)*

*-Show me Your ways, O Lord; Teach me Your paths. (Ps. 25:4)*

The Bible should become, by constant use and exposure, more and more a familiar territory to us. The more we "walk" in it, the broader and easier its roads and highways and avenues become. The more we journey through its pages the easier we can identify its landmarks. Furthermore, we can competently and skillfully guide others in doing the same. We certainly cannot effectively lead others through a land we ourselves have barely traversed. All of these things imply intentionality. Listlessness, boredom, half-heartedness, apathy have no place here.

**V.** We are to *inwardly digest* them. This is a very interesting image. I am reminded of a very quizzical biblical quote:

*Your words were found, and I ate them, And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; For I am called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts. (Jer. 15:16)*

The prophet says he literally ate God's Word. No, he did not actually bite off, chew up, and swallow a portion of the scrolls he was writing. This would have done nothing for his spirit, and would only have brought indigestion! He internalized God's Word, and, as we noted above, somehow took it into the deepest portion of his being:

*I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth More than my necessary food. (Job 23:12)*

Digestion is the very last stage of the process of ingestion. After having chewed our food, we swallow it, consigning it to a process that will eventually cause the food to actually become a very part of our bodies. If the food has not been properly prepared for digestion, however, we will likely become very ill. The fifth step is only possible after the successful completion of the first four steps. The result of healthy digestion is nourishment and growth. To digest God's Word is to complete the process that we began when we first endeavored to fulfill the spirit of today's Collect.

What will be the consequence of all this? It will be that *by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we [will] embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.* Hope is that which keeps us waiting for the sun after many

days of clouds and rain. Hope is that which allows us to look past the difficulty of our circumstances to a future far brighter than the brightest of our dreams. Hope is that which enables us, as we walk through the winding, unpredictable paths of this life, to patiently continue with a sure sense that all of life for the faithful Christian is heading resolutely toward a conclusion that will make all of it worthwhile.

Help us, Lord, to do these things, for Thy sake, and for ours.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*