

“Grant us so to hear scripture, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.”

I don't usually choose to preach about a collect, but the one this morning is one of the more memorable, and oft quoted collects.

A little history about it: It was written for the first Anglican prayer book in 1549 and it emphasizes the study of scripture because that was an important Reformation theme. The English Church was breaking away from Rome. Before Thomas Cranmer wrote and compiled the new Book of Common Prayer, worship was in lots of little missals and contained so many saint's days that the people never really got to hear much of the Bible, and never in English. But with the new prayer book came a new schedule of readings set down for the daily and Sunday services, the people were then able to hear almost all of the Bible if they came to church every day. And that is still the case, if you come to church every day.

As you know, our service on Sunday morning consists of two parts, the service of the Word and the Holy Communion or Service of the Sacrament. Today we will talk about the Word and next week, on Christ the King Sunday we will talk about the Sacrament.

You heard our readers this morning read lessons from the Old and New Testaments. And now you'll listen to me say some remarks about those readings and hopefully something about how they relate to our lives, but how many of us actually read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the text. Inwardly digest? Are we supposed to eat scripture? Well, in a way, yes. Listen to this passage from The Book of Revelation part of John's dream is that he heard a voice from heaven:

Revelation 10:8-10 ⁸ Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." ⁹ So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll;

and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." ¹⁰ So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.

Eating the scripture is a good metaphor for taking it fully into ourselves, trusting it, and making it our own. It may seem sweet at first, but then bitterness might arise as we realize what it means, how we are to interpret it, and what we are to do with it. The metaphor of eating the Bible means that it is something organic and in essence edible. It isn't a rock that is immovable, and impossible to digest. It's a living, breathing document which is the way that God still speaks to us.

Are the prophecies we heard today sweet in our mouths and bitter in our stomachs? It takes some work to think about, and interpret what we have heard. Paul warns us against idleness in his letter. We have work to do as Christians. The silent time that I allow after the sermon is finished, and before we move on to the creed, is the time in which you are meant to think about what the texts we have heard mean to you today in light of your experience. So, I encourage you during that time of silence to not start looking for the creed in your prayer book, or read the announcements, but to read one of today's Bible passages again, or simply sit quietly and digest God's Word.

Ah, the Bible. It's that book that you've probably got on your bookshelf in plain view, but may not have gotten it down to read it recently. Perhaps your Bible is a treasured family Bible with dates of weddings and births listed in the front. Perhaps you've stolen a Gideon's Bible from a hotel room and read a little when you were on a trip.

Bibles get passed down through generations, revered, and then shelved. Thomas Cranmer's new collect exhorts us to eat the book not let it gather dust. But if the contents bore you, you

probably won't be anxious to read it. If the book is exciting, you'll be drawn to it. The Bible is both, and so it takes some work to read your way through to the good parts.

If you are a Harry Potter devotee you may remember that Hagrid gave Harry an exciting, dangerous book in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. The book was called the *Monster Book of Monsters*. It was a particularly vicious book that attacked anyone who tried to read it. But you don't have to be a Harry Potter fan to get the image of a hairy green book with teeth and a mind of its own. Harry put a belt around his to keep it shut. Others used spello tape to secure the safety of their fingers. It's a task much easier to do with two people than with just one. One person holds the book closed and the other fastens the belt around it.

That's how it is with the Bible too. It really helps to read it with someone or in a group. It can be dangerous, particularly in the hands of some who wish to lift out particular phrases to attack others. It bites. But it also comforts, uplifts and gives hope if you take to heart what you find in its pages. Mostly though, like the monster book, it can be subdued only if two or more work together. If I read some of those passages all by myself, I'm likely to be frightened, distressed, and maybe even disgusted by what is found on some of the pages in this perilous book.

But where would we be without the Bible? We certainly wouldn't be here today. It is the foremost basis for our knowledge about Jesus, the Christian life. This is where we get the inspiration of our faith. If it is to inspire us, we must read it and try our best to understand it and digest it. Understanding comes through study.

Take for example our first reading from Isaiah. When I read it by myself I have had questions and doubts. If God is about to create a new heaven and new earth with people who all live past one hundred years and the lion eats straw, well, where is it? This prophecy was written

about 2500 years ago and it doesn't seem to have happened yet. At what point in time do we say that a prophecy is false? Is prophecy delayed prophecy denied?

When studied with others and knowing the history of the period, this passage in particular gives real hope that God's new world IS coming into being. God is still at work and creating that new earth. Think about the ways in which this is true. Last Sunday we heard about Mother Teresa and how she brought peace and hope to so many in Calcutta. Look at Greg Mortensen and the work he and his organization does to continue to show that by bringing education to girls in Afghanistan a new world is being created there. Doctors who work feverishly night and day to save babies from cholera in Haiti are proving the prophecy that infants can live more than a few days. They can only save one child at a time, but they do so in great hope and faith in God's creation. These are things that we discover about the truth of the prophecy when we study and talk together about what they mean.

If I read today's Gospel reading alone with no prior history of the text, I would not be able to understand what Jesus was saying. Jerusalem was, and still is in some ways, a city under siege. Is the end time coming now? It hasn't come for 2000 years so was Jesus wrong? This passage is also heard differently depending on where you live and what your experience is. We have to talk it out together to understand what the scripture meant to those living in Jerusalem then, and what it means to us. In essence: Things will sometimes be difficult, but God loves us and saves us.

We must get our Bibles down from our shelves and study them, together if possible. Now that I am beginning my second year with you here it's time to start a Bible Study group. I will announce it soon, and I hope that if you are able you will make an effort to attend it. "Brothers and sisters (as Paul would say) do not be weary in doing what is right." (2 thes 3:13). You may just find that eating this book will save your life!