

READ, MARK, LEARN AND INWARDLY DIGEST

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The Roman Emperor Gaius Caligula was intent to install his bust in the Temple in Jerusalem. And why not? The Emperor was the emperor, after all, and one of his many titles, Divi Filius (Son of God), was inscribed on every coin used by Romans and Jews alike. In Jesus' lifetime, the Roman Emperor was called "Divine," and was titled "Lord," "Redeemer," "Liberator," and "Savior of the World." So why not install his own bust in the Temple in Jerusalem? There was huge resistance to this threat of desecration among the Jewish community, as might be imagined. A revolt was predicted... which is why we read in the Gospel appointed for today about wars and rumors of wars: the Jews versus Rome, nation against nation. And to compound the tension and despair, our Gospel lesson speaks of a severe, multi-year drought that affected the lands east of the Mediterranean. The good news we hear on Jesus' lips is that the end is not yet. This may seem like the end, but it's not yet... which is a word of hope. Our knowing that historic information will make a difference how we make meaning of this Gospel lesson appointed for today: the historical context in which Jesus spoke.

It's also important for us to know that Jesus' words in the Gospel were not taken down as dictation; they were not recorded "live." These are remembered words, written down from memory about 30 years after Jesus spoke them. Now this is 2012. Can you remember what was said 30 years ago: 1982. Ronald Reagan was our President, the CD had just been introduced by Sony, Time magazine named "The Computer" as the person of year, Disney's Epcot Center has just opened, Prince Charles and Lady Diana have a newborn son named William. That's remembered from 30 years ago.

Jesus speaks these words. They are recorded 30 years later. These words (and many others attributed to Jesus) are distributed, remembered and revered as authentic (or not), a process which took the church almost 300 years to clarify, what we call the Canon of Holy Scripture. And so these words we read in the Gospels and elsewhere throughout the Bible have been tested and authenticated and revered and proclaimed and memorized down through the centuries. We call the Bible our Holy Scripture, both because of its sources – the people and the events where God has inspired and intervened – and because the words have been made holy by the holy people of God who have looked to Bible down through the centuries as the living voice of God, continually active to convert, nourish and transform us.

We began our liturgy with a prayer, what we call the Collect of the Day: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast

the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ..." To "hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the holy Scriptures. How to do that? I'll name three ways, three practices:

Firstly, to look at the Scriptures with an investigative and curious mind. That presumes we will use our minds and do our homework. Like with this Gospel lesson appointed for today, we need to know something of the historical context. What is the backdrop? If you don't know the context, it's very easy to misconstrue what was said or what was intended. In the election season that has just ended here in the United States, sadly we heard, again-and-again, how candidates took their political opponents' words out of context, leaving us, the hearer, with the wrong message, sometimes the opposite of what the speaker had intended. The context of the text matters.

As is the integrity of the text. And by integrity I mean hearing particular words of the Bible as how they relate to other words, teaching, understanding of the Bible. Otherwise, you can make the Bible say almost anything by cutting and pasting selected words or phrases... like, "Judas went out and hung himself. Go and do likewise." If you frontload a particular agenda when you open the Bible, you can justify almost anything. We look at some of the dark history of our own country, and we can see how the Bible was used as a principal justification for the practice of slavery, for the mistreatment of Native Americans, for the subjugation of women. Down through the centuries, an appalling number of crusades, wars, and genocides have been propagated and justified using the authority – the pseudo-authority – of the Bible. That's called "proof texting."

We also need to use our minds to understand what kind of literature we are reading in the Bible. The Bible includes writings of law, history, wisdom sayings and proverbs, biography, poetry and songs, prophecies, the words and work of Jesus, letters, and dreams and visions. The particular type of literature will inform how we read and understand it. If, for example, we are reading something from the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, or the Revelation to John in the New Testament, we are reading dream language... which will be as majestic, perhaps as surreal, perhaps as bizarre as your own dreams. Which isn't to say dream language is unimportant, but it is symbolic language. What does that symbol mean: what did that symbol mean in its historic context and – because it's been saved and passed down to us through the Canon of Scripture – and how does that symbol translate in today's world.

Likewise, we often need to make the distinction between what is to be understood literally – like Jesus' telling us to forgive our enemies – and what is to be understood not literally but truly. I'm thinking particularly of metaphoric language. When Jesus says he is a good shepherd and we are sheep, when Jesus says he is a vine and we are branches, he is speaking metaphorically. I'm not a sheep; I'm not a vine, nor are you. Those are metaphors, and they point to the truth. Just as in Jesus' teaching in parables. They're just stories, but the stories reveal profound truth. Just as in the beginning, the Book of Genesis, we read the account of creation. It's a story. It's not literal. To try to make it

literal will only diminish the truth. The truth being conveyed is that God is the creator of everything that was and is and shall be. That's the truth of it.

Secondly, we need an approach to the Bible that has integrity given what is present and what is missing given the time in which we live. You can search the Scriptures ad infinitum and find nothing about nuclear armament, nor global warming, nor genetically-engineered farming practices. We could make quite a long list of what isn't in the Bible. Likewise, we may find any number of teachings in the Bible which do not speak truth to us today. Jesus speaks any number of times about slaves, slavery as a given; that teaching and its context has to be interpreted. We read any number of things about women – their place, their role, their subordination to men. We can read about divorce and remarriage; we can read about politics. Some years ago I was doing some work in Haiti, and I was quizzed by someone about my interpretation of the Bible. Now this was a Haitian man, most of whose family had been cruelly tortured, then brutally killed by the Haitian dictator, Papa Doc. This Haitian man pushed me to Romans 13 which begins, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed..." This man, in rage and in tears, told me why that statement of St. Paul was not true. And so the two of us set out to figure out what in the world, what in St. Paul's world, Paul was talking about... so we could figure out how or if it applied to our world today.

The Anglican tradition is to revere the Scriptures, but to understand that they must be both interpreted and viewed alongside the other ways of God's revelation. The Anglican formula is to understand authority as a graceful synergy between Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience: Scripture plus tradition. Tradition, which recognizes that the people of God were following, obeying, worshiping God before they had text in hand. Tradition also recognizes how the church has historically made sense of the Bible. Scripture plus tradition plus reason. Reason recognizes that we have been created with minds to think and hearts to discern. We don't go brain dead when we read the Scriptures. We need not hesitate to use our intellects – informed by many disciplines – as we approach the Scriptures. Scripture plus tradition plus reason plus experience. Experience is what it is. How does what you are reading in the Scriptures ring true to your own life experience and, if not, then what? The Anglican approach is to be on good speaking terms with Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

A couple of years ago I was teaching in a seminary in Kenya. At the beginning of a course on the Gospels, I was vetted by some of the students. They wanted to know if I believed the whole Bible as the literal word of God, and to practice its teachings wholly. I said to the students some of what I have shared here about the different kinds of literature in the Bible. I told them my teaching would be interpretative, not simply expository, for reasons you here will understand. They pushed me about my believing and practicing everything. Everything. And so I asked them about snakes, whether they worshiped with snakes. I told them about the church tradition found in Appalachia where snake

handling figures prominently into the worship life of the church as a symbol of God's mysterious power. We looked at the Gospel according to Mark and Luke where Jesus speaks very clearly about snakes. And then we talked about speaking in tongues and about dreams and visions and about demons and exorcism. The seminarians came from a great variety of church backgrounds; what was normal practice for some was bizarre to others. And everyone had their reasons. Needless to say, no one wanted to pursue snake-handling for their home churches.

When we are having to make sense of the Bible – both because of what is missing or because of what is present – we are leaning on Jesus' teaching. Following his death and resurrection, before his ascension, he promised that the "Spirit of truth" would be sent to us. Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, [the Spirit] will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." So we pray that we know the truth through God's Spirit, and especially where we come up short: because of what is missing in the Bible, or come up short because of what is present in the Bible, but does not ring true to our own reason and experience.

And then, lastly, we have in the Scriptures a treasury of guidance, strength, hope, and comfort. The Scriptures are worthy to be read seriously and critically; they are also worthy to be read devotionally. And so our prayer at the outset of the liturgy: "Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them." To inwardly digest the Scriptures will take a lifetime, and there is a treasury to be gleaned. An especially meaningful way to read the Scriptures devotionally is to follow an ancient monastic practice called *lectio divina*, holy reading. Pay attention to what catches your attention: a word, a metaphor, a story, a teaching, a song. Take into your heart, take into your memory what you're drawn to.

Especially in a day and age when we have so much coming at us all the time – so much information, so many words, such a myriad of choices, which can be overwhelming – a wonderful and ancient practice is to memorize Scripture. Not all of it, of course. But memorize what speaks truth to you, what gives you strength and hope, courage and comfort. And then you have it with you when you will need it, especially if you are overwhelmed or obsessing, to draw from a treasury of truth, Holy Scripture which you have taken to memory and which can help you find your way.

Some years back I was sitting at the bedside of my beloved Grandmother, a holy woman, someone who adored me and had done so much for me. She was now dying. We were alone together, and she was slipping in and out of consciousness. Of course, I had never experienced this before – my beloved Grandmother's dying – and knew that something was needed, needed both for my Grandmother and for me. Out of my memory came the words of Psalm 23, the King James version, which I had been required to learn as a child in Sunday School. I began softly praying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want..." And my Grandmother started mouthing the same words, "He

maketh me lie down beside still waters." And on we prayed together to the end, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." And she died. It was amazing.

You are going to need some strong, comforting, hope-filled words, tested over the ages and made holy by the multitudes who have lived before you. You will need some strong, comforting, hope-filled words to navigate life – yours or someone else's – sooner or later. What can you draw from the Scriptures, what can you take to memory and heart, that will help you claim what you know to be true? Do that. St. Paul said, "For I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." That is true, completely true. Find some words from Scripture that will help you remember that and claim that in your hour of need.