

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them. (The Collect for Advent 2, BCP)

Today is Bible Sunday and the last Sunday of the Trinity season. What better way to celebrate the Bible than with these memorable words first penned by Thomas Cranmer for the Book of Common Prayer in 1549. It is worth bearing in mind that the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, had only just been translated into English – so everyone, even the ploughboy, as Tyndale said, could read and understand it themselves.

‘If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy who drives a plough to know more of the scriptures than you do.’

By removing the Bible from the control of the Church and having the audacity to allow ordinary people to engage with it themselves, Tyndale was martyred.

Cranmer instructs us ordinary people to do five things: to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.

Just imagine being that ploughboy in 1526, **hearing** the words of Tyndale’s New Testament translation being read to him, and for the first time being able to engage with the words himself, and without a priest putting the stories into his own words. Tyndale’s gift was to use everyday language so that the ancient words of the Bible spoke afresh to the people of his time. Hearing Scripture read to us means we can let our minds focus on a word or a phrase. We don’t necessarily have to listen to every word. Today we call this ‘dwelling in the word’ – so don’t worry if you don’t listen to every word of the Bible readings in church!

Reading scripture, on the other hand, is a very different way of engaging with the Bible than just listening. How should we read the Bible? One of the great glories of the Bible is that it contains so many different perspectives ranging over at least a thousand years, and from different cultural and geographical locations.

That’s why Jesus was so critical of the Jews or rabbis in his fierce debate with them: ‘You search the Scriptures,’ Jesus said to them, ‘because you think that in them you have eternal life’ (Jn 5:39). We all know this too well today; there are some Christians who just love quoting the Bible as if somehow quoting a few Bible words is enough to settle any matter.

But of course, as the saying goes, even the ‘devil can quote scripture for his own purpose’! Jesus’ point is that we don’t worship the words of the Bible because we know that they are human attempts to witness to God. All human words are limited. We must always remember, as Isaiah so beautifully expresses it, that God’s ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

But we are not just to hear and read scripture we are also to **mark** it. We can mark it or take note of it in our minds or more importantly literally mark it by making notes on a passage by reading a commentary or Bible study notes.

For example, we need to know that the passage we heard today (Is 45:22-end) by the prophet Isaiah was written around 586 BC when the Jews had been exiled to Babylon; we need to know this to understand just how radical Isaiah's theology is. Far from home and tempted to the worship of the Babylonian gods, God, through Isaiah, challenges these gods to help the exiles' sense of abandonment. But clearly these so-called gods, are just wooden statues and obviously completely unable to provide any spiritual sustenance. Instead, the exiles must 'turn' their minds to the one God, creator of all, the one source of hope, the one before whom 'every knee shall bow' - a phrase St Paul re-used when speaking of Jesus. That's the clue to understanding Isaiah's radical message: that God is not just the God of the Jews, but of *all* humanity. Note and mark this – because if Isaiah's vision of God isn't limited to the Jewish people, then it can't also be confined to Christians, but *all* people of faith.

We still haven't fully **learnt** this lesson, yet we continually claim that *our* God is the right one. Christians even do this amongst themselves, which is why the King's visit and time of prayer with the Pope last week is so important. Just imagine how the world might be if all the great religions were to copy this and be more accepting of each other.

But we are not just to hear, read, mark and learn from scripture we are also to **inwardly digest** it. Jesus says to the rabbis that their failure to understand scripture as a witness to his ministry is because they do not allow God's word to dwell in them. Ultimately the words of the Bible are there for us to meditate upon and to aid our relationship with God and with Christ. But they are human words, so some parts of the Bible may just not work for you. Inwardly digest what does speak to you and leave to one side, for the time being, what does not.

Today we give thanks for the Bible which has inspired millions and shaped cultures for at least three thousand years. Let us use it wisely. 'Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them' Amen.

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