

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA  
Proper 28, Year A, November 19, 2017  
The Rev. Bill Queen  
“Read, Mark, and Learn the Bible”

do you have a particular copy of the Bible that is special to you?; I have several; I have the one that sat on my Grandmother Mimi’s coffee table next to the candy dish: it sat there for many years, but I don’t think it got picked up and read very much; I also have a large and ornate family Bible from the 1920s: one of its pages, before the start of the actual Bible text, was a full page temperance pledge, with lines for family members to sign their names to it—but there were no signatures on it; I have the Bible I received when I joined the Presbyterian Church as a child: a gift Bible with onionskin paper with no margins; when I went off to college I bought a paperback Bible for my own use: I chose it specifically because it had paper thick enough and margins wide enough to write in, and I filled it with lots of underlining and notes

I hope that each of you has, in addition to any gift or memorable family Bibles, one that you can write in and use; one that doesn’t sit on a table or a shelf gathering dust; our Collect of the Day today invites us to reflect about how we use our Bibles; it outlines a process for approaching Bible passages and the Bible as a whole

the first thing this collect gives us is a theology of the Bible: “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written...”; believing that God caused the Bible to be written is not the same thing, as some Christian denominations believe, that God wrote it himself; the Episcopal Church affirms God’s inspiration of the Bible, yes, but in a way that requires us to look carefully at any Bible passage to discern how well the human authors and translators have been faithful to that inspiration; every human being is fallible, including the individual authors of Biblical books; when we see internal contradictions in the Bible we recognize that an author may have not been sufficiently attentive to that inspiration; one reason Episcopalians do not do a lot of citing of individual verses from the Bible is that we try to understand the larger messages that come through the whole of the scriptures, and not just from individual verses

the next thing this collect gives us is the purpose of the Bible: the “holy Scriptures [were] written for our learning;” this means that our approach to the Bible has to be more than casual; it has to be deliberate, lifelong, and guided by principles of learning and study: learning and study that is both both academic and of the heart; what any particular passage means is not always obvious right off the page; so the rest of the collect goes on to list how we can undertake a well-rounded process in our approach to the Bible

first, it suggests we have to hear the Bible; physically we have to put ourselves in a place, with the time, and in a proper frame of mind and heart to listen to its words; and we have to prepare ourselves to be attentive to what we might hear from the Bible; we’ve got to want to hear what is in the Bible that God wants us to hear

next, we have to read the Bible; not by just skimming over its words, but read it carefully and deeply; read it as if we don’t already know what is in it, because our preconceptions can blind us to what is actually there beneath our eyes; I find it helpful when I can to read the Bible aloud, as it slows me down and the words register on my ears as well as my eyes; and reading regularly is important; like vitamins, a daily dose of Bible reading gives the best results; try taking your scripture insert home and rereading it each day of the week; late in the week, even after you know you have read every word several times already, you will probably discover new things there; that comes from deep and careful reading

next, we have to mark the Bible; yes, this gives you permission to highlight, underline, and write in the margins of your Bible; or you may prefer to write your notes in a separate Bible reading notebook; and we don’t read it like a novel, just to get the story line; we read it as a reference book, and those notes help us go back and find important passages again, and help us process the importance of what we have read; and when we go back to them at different points in our lives, we see that a passage may bring new and different meanings to us

next, we have to learn the Bible; memorization is one way to learn, but not necessarily the best; what is most important to learn are the viewpoints taken in the Bible’s many books: the recurring themes of justice and mercy, of love and grace; learn the terminology of the Bible so you can talk about its content with other people; and learn some of the images and metaphors that are used

over and over: that God is our shepherd; that we are laboring in a vineyard; that Jesus is the bread of life, the light of the world, the way, the truth, and the life; and so many others that convey powerful and beautiful truths; use Biblical vocabulary, and make the words and images and metaphors part of your way of understanding God, other people, and yourself

last in this list of how-tos is that we have to inwardly digest the Bible; we take it in, like food, in a way that sustains and strengthens us; we are what we eat, and it is equally true that we are what we read; approaching the bible as necessary sustenance gives our souls the nourishment that keeps us spiritually alive and healthy

the final statement in the collect sums up why we do all this learning: “that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life;” we don’t learn the Bible just so we can know the Bible, so we can answer Jeopardy and Trivial Pursuit questions, or show off our Bible smarts; we learn the Bible because it point us to something beyond the Bible: it points us to leading a different kind and depth of life in this world, because it makes us aware of God’s presence; and it points us to the hope of experiencing God’s presence in the next life; do keep hearing, reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting the Bible, so you can experience more and more of this great gift God has given us, for now, and for fovever