

Advent 2

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome:

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight O' Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.”

The question of the day is: what do we, in the Anglican Church, celebrate today? The answer should be Bible Sunday. It's been a long-standing Anglican Tradition to celebrate the Second Sunday in Advent as Bible Sunday, a celebration inspired by the words of the Collect, words that, for us older Anglicans, resound in our minds and follow us throughout our lives:

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...

Written by Archbishop Cranmer for the 1549 Prayer Book, this Collect emphasizes Cranmer's conviction that all the scriptures should be read. Indeed, Cranmer, in the Preface to the 1549 Prayer Book, expressed that reading of all the scriptures had been neglected in the medieval service books.

Under the guidance of Cranmer, the 1549 Prayer Book set out an orderly schedule for reading nearly the entire Bible during the course of the year. We call this schedule the Lectionary. Using the Lectionary and reading the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, we can easily accomplish the goal of reading almost all of the Bible in one year.

Perhaps, since the Reformation, more and more Christians have come to regard the Church as a product of Holy Scripture. In this context, we might best say, the New Testament. However, quite the opposite is true.

In reality, early Christians, convinced that the end was near and the Second Coming of Christ eminent, saw little if any need for a written record concerning Jesus Christ. Still, by the end of the first century all the books of the New Testament were completed, with the Gospel of John being one of the last.

The compilation and canonization of the Bible came about in the late Fourth Century. By then, most of the texts that were to be incorporated into the Bible were already in use by the Church, as attested by St. Athanasius in his Festal Epistles about 367. The final selection of texts, or books, to be included and considered canonical came about during a council held at Rome in 382.

Now, while the Collect for this Second Sunday in Advent is very powerful, and the inspiration for the Anglican Communion to celebrate this Sunday as Bible Sunday, the Epistle passage from St. Paul's letter to the Church at Rome is equally powerful in its support of the reading of Holy Scripture as necessary to understanding the relationship of God towards man and the understanding of Christian duties and doctrine. Paul's purpose was to focus the reader on the nature of the Christian fellowship and unity in Jesus Christ.

In Paul's time, the scriptures to which he refers were the Old Testament. The New Testament did not exist then, except in fragments. It was much later, as we have noted, that the writings which were to make up the Bible as we know it today, were canonized or sanctioned by the Church as a whole body of works.

We may also note that many of Paul's Epistles had been written by the time he wrote his letter to the Church at Rome. He wrote this letter sometime in the year 58 while he was at Corinth.

The passage we read today begins:

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

In Paul's context, the writings in the scripture, that is the Old Testament, were well adapted to express Christian duties and doctrine, and provided "comfort" as the Christian endured the sufferings and trials inflicted by the world. Tied to the word "comfort" is the idea of "exhortation," in that the scriptures also provide admonitions as well as instructions, and serve as an exhortation to patience in trials and afflictions.

In the scriptures one finds hope by the examples of the ancient saints through their confidence in God and through their sufferings and patience.

Though introduced parenthetically, the thought carries through to be the focus of his letter and that focus is the unity and inclusiveness of the Church, Christian fellowship in Christ.

Mind you, Paul was not one to be politically correct. The inclusiveness that was at the forefront in the mind of St. Paul is not the same politically correct inclusiveness of this day and age.

Rather, it is the idea that all people in the Church should be bound into one. In the context of Paul's writing, the people included Jew and Gentile. Each brought to the fellowship of Christ a bias, as each had come from a set of traditions that set them apart within the social context.

For Paul, it did not matter whether they were Jew or Gentile: what mattered was their faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save all of mankind, not just the Jews, though He was born a Jew.

Paul draws support from scripture for this novel concept, specifically Psalm 18, verse 50:

For this cause will I give thanks unto thee, O Lord, among the Gentiles, and sing praises unto thy name.

Deuteronomy 32, verse 43:

Rejoice, O ye nations, with his people: for he will avenge the blood of his servants, and will render vengeance to his adversaries, and will be merciful unto his land, and to his people.

Psalm 117, verse 1:

O Praise the Lord, all ye nations; praise him, all ye peoples.

and Isaiah 11, verse 10:

And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek; and his rest shall be glorious.

Christ came into the world to confirm the promises made to the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and to Moses, to David, even to those that followed.

The promise was of a Messiah sent to the Jews but not confined to the Jews alone.

This we see in the passages from scripture that Paul quotes:

...as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name.

And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people.

And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust.

It is of particular note that Christ came into the world to minister, not to be ministered to.

“As a minister of the circumcision” meant that Christ was born under the Law. He was subject to the Law and kept the Law, as did His Disciples, and His Twelve Apostles. Indeed, it was among the Jews that Jesus lived and to whom He preached. His Apostles were instructed to preach to the Gentiles, to the world, only after His Resurrection.

Paul emphasizes that our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world for the salvation of all mankind, though that salvation was offered first to the Jews who rejected Christ.

That is the promise: the Gospel of Salvation, the fulfilling of God’s revelation through His Son, Jesus Christ.

If, then, Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the World, all who accept Him as Saviour are united in One Body, the Church, to be of one mind, one faith.

And, Paul gives us in a word, what the Christian Faith is: Hope, Joy, Peace, and Power.

We have hope in God as the author and giver of Grace, as the source of all mercy and love, in whom there is plenteous redemption, in whom there is eternal life.

We have joy in the consciousness of the presence of the living Lord, certain that nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Jesus Christ.

We have peace in believing in Jesus Christ, with Whose Blood we have been sprinkled and by whom we have been justified; we have peace, as a body, through our common belief in Christ.

And, we are sustained through the Power of the Holy Ghost, Who knows our weaknesses and inspires us to become the person we ought to be.

In Jesus Christ we have the fulfillment of the Old Covenant through His Blood, making a New Covenant which brings salvation to the whole world, to all of mankind. The promises of the fathers have been fulfilled in Christ. Fulfilled because of God's unfathomable love.

Now, we wait for His return to complete our salvation in the Final Judgment. We wait not passively but in watchfulness, keeping our lamps filled, inspired with the hope and joy that awaits us.

We keep watch in the fellowship of all Christians, all the saints, throughout all time, and in particular with our own Christian Family in which we realize the Graces and Mercies, the joys, the hope, the love, and the Peace of God which passes all understanding.

In the Church Year, we celebrate this as the season of Advent; but our Advent as Christians began with Christ's Ascension. We are now in the time of expectation, uncertain of the moment but assured by our faith in Jesus Christ that, at that moment, we will be prepared for His loving and merciful Judgment.