

Reading and Meditation on God's Holy Word

Daily reading of the Bible is a source of guidance, inspiration, and instruction. The Prayer Book and the Anglican tradition are sometimes described as a way of reading the Bible. Some people simply like to dip into their Bible and to explore. The Prayer Book offers a guide for reading the Bible on page xvi and following. These are the readings for daily Morning and Evening Prayer. If this is too much reading, you can pick one of the books being read. For example, you could choose to read the Old Testament lesson (either as two readings or combined in one long reading,) or the daily Gospel reading. Or, you could read the selection from the Epistle. If you do this, you can go at your own pace and still follow along with the public reading of Scripture at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer.

To help make sense of the readings and to see what they teach, you can pick up one of the photocopies of the commentaries on the daily office readings that St Peter's publications prints. These are available at the back of the church each week. You may also find it helpful to buy a study Bible, the kind of Bible that has notes at the bottom of the pages and introductions to the chapters. These simple aids can make a big difference in what you discover when you seek to *read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest* the Holy Scriptures (see the Collect for Advent II, page 97.)

In a preface to one of the early translations of the Bible into English, known as the Great Bible (1540), Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote a preface about reading the Bible that included a long quotation from John Chrysostom, the fourth century Archbishop of Constantinople. It is very down-to-earth: "What sayest thou man? . . . Is it not for thee to study and to read the scripture, because thou art encumbered and distracted with cares and business? So much the more it is behoveful [needful] for thee to have defense of scriptures. . . . Thou art in the midst of the sea of worldly wickedness, and therefore thou needest the more of ghostly succour and comfort! . . . Thy wife provoketh thee to anger; thy child giveth thee occasion to take sorrow and pensiveness; thine enemies lie in wait for thee; thy friend (as thou takest him) sometime envieth thee; thy neighbour misreporteth thee or picketh quarrels against thee; thy mate or partner undermineth thee; thy lord, judge, or justice, threateneth thee; poverty is painful unto thee; the loss of thy dear and well-beloved causeth thee to mourn; prosperity exalteth thee, adversity bringeth thee low. Briefly, so divers and so manifold occasions of cares, tribulations, and temptations, beset thee and besiege thee round about. Where canst thou have armour or fortress against thine assaults? Where canst thou have salves for thy sores but of holy scripture?"

Lent – A time of refreshment and opportunity

The exhortation on Ash Wednesday calls us to keep a "holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditation on God's holy word." (BCP, p 612) Lent is a time of struggle, but it is also a season of opportunity. The Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent describes the temptation of Christ in the wilderness (St Matthew, chapter 4, and BCP 141.) We learn that the Spirit of God leads Christ into the wilderness. The Spirit of God in us, if we will be moved by it, will lead us into conflict with all that is contrary to God's love and truth. The wilderness is also a place of refreshment and growth. I hope that you will approach the season of Lent with hope, trusting that whatever efforts we may make to prepare the soil of our hearts for the seed of the divine Word will be blessed abundantly. One basic challenge is that it is difficult to take something on unless we make space for it; otherwise it is just a burden. We can grow through our inability to keep a simple rule, but it is good to try to do what is manageable for us.

How can we keep a holy Lent?

By prayer. Prayer describes our seeking God and our communion with God. Lent is an opportunity to become more attentive to the life of prayer. If you are wondering how Lent can be a time of richest prayer, please see the paragraphs at the end of this note.

By self-examination and repentance. This can simply be a part of our prayer, and of the preparation we make at the beginning of the service of Holy Communion. Some people find it helpful to make a special confession during Lent, either in private or with the aid of a priest (see the Exhortation in the BCP, p 90-91).

By fasting and self-denial. The practice of fasting is based on the teaching of Jesus (*eg Matt 6:16, Mark 2:20*) and the example of saints in the Old and New Testaments. For suggestions about how we might observe this and why, please see below.

By reading and meditation on God's Holy Word. Reading the Bible is not just a way to get information. The Scriptures are a kind of food. When we read the Bible this way, we take the time to think about it, reflect on what it means for us, and just enjoy what is being shown to us. Again, more information below.

Prayer

The *Book of Common Prayer* offers us a rule of life, a kind of guide that helps to order how we pray and live. St Paul exhorts us to “pray without ceasing.” This does not mean that we spend all our time reading prayers, but that our life becomes a kind of prayer: “we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee.” Prayer includes much more than asking for things, or even giving thanks. Prayer is a movement toward God, and a way by which the life of Spirit is shaped in us.

Prayer at Home

The life of prayer includes not only prayer in Church, but also how we pray at home, in a group or by ourselves. There are many guides to prayer and ways to pray. At the Lenten Retreat two years ago we considered contemplative prayer. Some people find the PACTS formula helpful (**P**ause, **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, **S**upplication or *A*sking).

The Prayer Book offers services that can help us pray at home also. Some people follow the daily offices of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer at home. This is a way to join in the daily services of the Church even when you cannot be there. The “Forms of Prayer to be used in Families,” pages 728-731, are short services that can structure and guide your prayers. You can use these services as they are, or add spaces for silence or for your own prayers (see also the prayers for “several occasions” pages 37-61.)

Compline, or even parts of Compline, can also offer a kind of personal or family prayer at night time (page 722.) If you use any of these services with children, they will quickly learn the responses and prayers by heart.

Whatever form you use, it is important to find some time for daily prayer. Prayer shapes who we are and how we live. That which we can do at any time, we may find that we do at no time. This is why people often find it helpful to find a regular time of day for prayer.

Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer at Church

If you are able to come to one of the Offices on a regular basis, even once per week, you will help to support the life of prayer in the parish and feed your daily prayer also. The Offices are a vital part of the life of the parish, one of the springs of life that nurtures our common life and that serve as a beacon of life, even when we are just two or three.

Fasting and self-denial

The Canadian Book of Common Prayer appoints the forty days of Lent and almost all Fridays of the year as days of abstinence. Friday is a weekly memorial of our Lord's Passion and a day for turning back to God. The days of Lent are days of self-denial that emphasize both the seriousness of sin and the greater Love of God. But what does it mean to keep these as days of abstinence?

Fasting has an outward and an inward part. The outward part involves giving up food and drink for a period of time. The Prayer Book appoints days of fasting and abstinence, but it is not said how exactly we are to fast. In the early Church, fasting often consisted of a complete giving up of food and drink until after evening prayer (in liturgical time, evening prayer marks the beginning of a new day.) Abstinence may involve giving up certain kinds of food (like meat or cheese,) giving up one meal, eating less at meals, or giving up delicacies or “strong drink.” Fasting is not dieting! How we fast is left to our judgment, only that it should involve real self-denial.

Fasting also has an inward part. The great purpose of fasting is prayer. This explains why fasting usually involves not only a denial of certain food, but a withdrawal even from innocent and normal past-times or social occasions. Fasting is an expression of sorrow over sin and a kind of spiritual training. Fasting or abstinence can make our bodies more human, more responsive to the work of the Holy Spirit, and more aware of our dependence on God. In the Gospel according to St Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples how to fast. It is hard to imagine why he would do this unless he intended his disciples then and his disciples now to fast.

The greatest hindrance to fasting and abstinence may be low expectations. Perhaps we don't fast because we don't hope for much, don't expect much. In the words of one theologian: “we kill the flesh in order to acquire a body.” We fast so that the whole of who we are may be more alive with the life of the Holy Spirit.