

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, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Written by Thomas Cranmer in 1542, this prayer in the Book of Common Prayer is the collect for the second Sunday in Advent, the beginning of the Church year, but it is not confined to the Anglican Church. John Wesley advised all to pray this prayer before reading scripture in the preface to his 1755 translation of the New Testament. It is also in the pew edition of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006). A variation of the original, "Grace to Receive the Word," is in a section of collects for general use in relation to worship and appears in this form:

Blessed Lord God, you have caused the holy scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast to the hope of eternal life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Thus the prayer is perhaps one of the most widely known and used of Archbishop Cranmer's prayers and is fitting to have in our hearts and minds as we learn of Episcopalians across the country studying God's word in Scripture.

In preparation for writing this article, I've talked to priests and people in Illinois, South Carolina, Michigan, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New York, examined websites and blogs, watched videos, and read talks made to aid parishioners in studying Scripture. It has been heartening to hear and see so much Spirit-inspired activity around reading the Bible in Episcopal Churches and in the Anglican communion. People seem hungry to read the Bible.

One priest told me that out of a parish of two hundred fifty people, almost sixty showed up regularly for Bible classes. "I expected twenty," he said. Some dioceses have already begun and others are embarking this fall on plans to offer bible study groups. Many churches have already begun bible study and are seeing the fruits of their work and sharing resources. I explain some of these in the section "results." So this enterprise is a glimpse of a work in progress. One priest said that engaging the congregation in reading the Bible together unleashed energy in unanticipated ways: a tremendous enthusiasm emerged in the congregation for worship, bible study, and service in the community. Another told me, "This is the most exciting thing I've done in my ministry." A

third said, "This was by far the biggest success of my ministry...We didn't get the whole turnout of fifty people each time, but we got close to it. In the back of my mind I was prepared to get only 12 – 15, which I would then loudly proclaim as a great success and how pleased I was. forty plus was a miracle."

Planning

Everyone talks about the careful planning necessary for Scriptural Studies in the parish because painstaking preparation both sets the tone and indicates the importance of the project. You don't fly a plane you are building. This doesn't mean we can't adapt to different circumstances in parish education or be flexible within groups. There are plans for a yearly or monthly or weekly Bible Study in resources listed at the end of this essay. "Why reinvent the wheel?" a priest who used one of them said to me. One parish used *The Story* (NIV) by Zondervan that divides the Bible into thirty chapters. It is designed for adults and children. Another parish created their own plan of three different levels of study to include maximal, average or minimal participation, thus accommodating different time commitments. Those that participate maximally could have an entire Scriptural passage to read with additional readings. Minimal participation might involve reading selected parts of the full scriptural passage for that week. Another parish planned one summer of bible study using four discussion sessions per week at a great variety of times together with an online site where members could log in and have online dialogue. People posted responses and questions.

In 2011, St Thomas' Church, Whitemarsh, Fort Washington, PA created "The Bible Challenge", to read the Bible in a year. The Center for Biblical Studies at this church now has a website that includes this and many other resources that have been widely used by parishes and dioceses throughout the Anglican Communion.

a) The Welcome

Leaders agree that the first thing to do is to create a welcoming atmosphere--one that avoids notions of guilt or shame including the "shoulds" that people harbor for not having read the Bible enough or at all. Start the invitation with a note of joy and a promise that inspiration, adventure, and discovery will be yours as a treasure forever. "No one's ever invited me to read the Bible before," one parishioner said. If that's true, then let's invite people into a joyous exploration of the Bible that will be theirs for the rest of their lives. One teacher told me she says to groups beginning bible study: "You will be upset and annoyed as well as inspired and enlightened. But you

won't be the same.”

In these plans we need to cater for those who can't do all the readings. One priest advises people at the outset of the program, "Don't try to catch up readings if you are behind! Start each week afresh." Such advice recognizes the realities of people's lives and seeks to avoid a sense of inadequacy or guilt.

b) Group Bible Study

Although people read the Bible alone for all sorts of reasons, group Bible study is important and preferred. One of the reasons draws on Jesus' words in Matt. 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” People have quicker and deeper insights in group bible study sharing and reacting to others' ideas. So making provision for many different forms of Bible reading groups in a parish context is essential even if the participation varies. Some parishes have bible studies for men's breakfast groups, choirs, young mothers, teens and young adults. Groups like these could be in addition to the adult education slot on Sunday. In several parishes, the Sunday adult education forum is presented more formally as a lecture which then becomes the approach to assigned readings discussed and assimilated in groups during the week.

Any plan for Bible reading in a parish could include a password-protected discussion board or blog with information about the overall schedule, resources, group listings, and weekly readings. Using that forum, participants can post contributions, comments, and offer discussion topics. This has the pedagogical benefit of keeping the discussion going outside of the specific bible study groups and includes participants by visibly valuing their contributions. Contributors to one parish blog included parishioners who identified and posted art and music accompanying each week's readings. This engaged other parishioners whose interest can be measured by the hits on this part of the blog. Art and music in themselves can draw in people to bible study and open up new thoughts and insights musicians and other artists have had about the text and ideas in it. It represents a considerable time commitment on the part of contributors. You can see the result in blogs and websites in the resources section at the end of this essay.

c) Results

Out of bible study may come a whole new set of people in the parish or diocese involved in small groups praying and developing prayer practices so as to build regular bible study as part of individual and corporate spiritual life. This experience is structured formation of religious life into which the Bible is now integrated. It is a mark of spiritual vitality in an Anglican context. “I

appreciated the background knowledge from the teacher,” a parishioner said. “I feel like I went from 3rd grade to graduate level in my reading and understanding of the New Testament.” Now there is a deeper commitment to knowing what is in scripture. This process represents a culture change in the community. Pedagogical questions arise: what is the text and its context; what did it say for whom it was written and what does it say to us? Conversation takes place about the lens a congregation brings to the text as an affluent or a not so well off community. Questions may emerge: What can we embrace and affirm so that we are not reactive? Is there a biblical dimension to this planned project or program?

Inside a parish, an established program of bible reading and study can have many uses. It can be used to integrate newcomers into the parish. “The story of the faith read in community builds community,” one priest said. It might be a platform for the development of EfM groups. EfM (Education for Ministry) is a program developed by the University of the South to educate people in reading the Bible. Over the course of a year, small groups meet weekly for several hours with a mentor or leader to read and discuss passages. Students prepare for these meetings by reading weekly assignments. The EfM website says: “In addition to EfM groups throughout the USA, EfM can be found in Germany, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the Bahamas, Hong Kong, Italy, and Switzerland. Over 70,000 persons have participated in the program, and in the United States more than 22,000 have completed the full four years. The 2006 USA enrollment reached more than 8,000. More than eighty dioceses of the Episcopal Church as well as other denominations have contractual arrangements with EfM.

An established program of bible reading in a parish necessitates finding and identifying people who would be good facilitators and group leaders. This creates a shared experience of teaching. Church school directors have found this to be a wonderful discovery.

Parishioners excited by the experience of Scripture Studies are no longer intimidated or even afraid of the Bible. “I felt guilty all my life not knowing the Bible. It was like a black hole,” an intelligent college-educated parishioner said. They can now understand contexts of biblical passages as opposed to lectionary fragmentation. “I liked how we tied in the writers and the historical context,” a parishioner said. Another said, “I enjoyed reading the books all together. We hear little bits of them in worship, so it was great to be able to read through whole books.” One priest told me that a parishioner said that she appreciated her sermon better for having read and studied the entire passage from which the gospel was taken three weeks before it was preached.

Such knowledge is often the basis for critical reflection on biblical texts: “What is Revelation doing in the Bible? I don’t like it,” one parishioner said. A men's breakfast bible study of the Psalms in one parish expressed reservations about some of the violent language. Such opinions stimulate open discussion and deeper bible study: what is the place of violence in biblical texts? How do we deal with “texts of terror”?

Attitudes to the Bible changed: a woman realized that she had used the Bible as a form of worship in itself—as the revealed Word of God. This introduced a discussion of the authority of the Bible. For many traditions the authority of the Bible comes from the authority of Christ. The Bible is the Word of God because Christ is the Word of God. But there are also many things in the Bible that are not gospel, and that are even opposed to the gospel. The Bible has no easy answers. It is not an idol. It is not history or science but is an ever-changing portrait of God's engagement with humanity. The hope here is that readers will develop a love for and familiarity with the Bible such that they will use it for guidance.

Conclusion

This essay describes what has been the experience of several Episcopal and Lutheran parishes and clergy and laity in them when undertaking Scriptural Studies. This is just the beginning. Now we need to collect each story of bible reading in parishes and dioceses so as to learn from each experience and improve. We also should support and find resources clergy and lay teachers need. Parish bible study can be the basis for new energy in the life of a worship community.

Resources

Father Jim's 90-Day Bible Blog by Father James M. Bimbi, rector of St. James' Church (Mill Creek Hundred) in Wilmington, Delaware: <http://frjim90daybibleblog.blogspot.com/>

New Testament Challenge-50: the New Testament Reading Blog for Peace Lutheran Church in Holland, MI by Mark DeLand and Pastor Mark Rich: <http://peaceholland.wordpress.com/>

The Center for Bible Studies at St Thomas Whitemarsh, Pa: <http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org/>

The Bible Project at St James' Church,

NYC: <http://02b56ea.netsolhost.com/BibleProject2011/about/>