

ADVENT 2

The words of the Collect for the 2nd. Sunday in Advent read as follows:-

'Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning; help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our saviour Jesus Christ.' These words have given this day, Advent 2, the reputation of being known as Bible Sunday.

It is a day when the more Protestant members of the church are inclined to do their bible thumping things, and the more catholic minded to issue warnings about the dangers of fundamentalism and therefore of the danger of allowing lay people access to the scriptures. "It is wiser to leave the bible to the experts" they say. "If we want to know anything we'll ask the Rector - after all, he gets paid for studying the Bible".

"The lay people of the church of England are theologically illiterate and it is better that they remain so". This quotation came from the lips of a Vicar in this diocese about ten years ago. There are many people in the church who still agree with this idea. It has its attraction. It means that lay people don't have to bother about such matters.

I suppose there are convincing arguments on both sides. The Bible is certainly a complex book - or collection of books -

spanning as it does almost 2000 years of history - containing such a wide variety of literature - myths and legends, poetry, law, and gospels - that the art of biblical interpretation demands considerable expertise - and is therefore best left to the experts. We all know that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. The majority of lay people in the church have little time to sit and read, mark, learn and inwardly digest anything - last of all the writings as complex as these. So it would perhaps be better if the text were to be left in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek. The texts themselves would then be guaranteed accurate - there would be no disputes about authenticity, and the various Bible Societies could pack up and go home.

The trouble with this is that the cat is already out of the bag - or the genie is already out of the lamp. The Bible has been translated into almost every language on earth. It has been subjected to all kinds of different interpretations and we can't turn the clock back. Cranks and con-men, Mormons and Moonies, Jehovah's Witnesses and many others all claim to have got it right and anyone who has been trapped on the doorstep by any one of these will know how difficult it is to find an answer to the various weird interpretations. What are we to do? What do we make of it all? Is it really blissful to be ignorant and folly to be wise?

Well, I think the first thing to be said and recognised about our Anglican way is that we are not totally ignorant of the Bible and of Biblical teaching. The scriptures are read methodically during our worship. I think that we tend to neglect most of the Old Testament and are too selective about what we read of the New, but

it remains true that the Bible is read in all Anglican worship. We all therefore have the opportunity to grow in our understanding of the Scriptures.

Secondly we believe as members of the Church of England that our faith is based on the threefold foundation of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Anything we do or say as Anglicans must be subject to that formula and tested by that criterion. Is it Scriptural? Is it within our tradition? Is it Reasonable? We are called to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our mind. That's where reason comes in. Article 5 of the thirty-nine articles of faith says that "Holy Scripture contains all that is necessary to salvation; so that whatever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith." Also, Anglicans have always held that the scriptures are there to serve the church and not the other way around. We are not slaves to the scriptures; the scriptures are there for our edification and inspiration. Tradition and reason require that our faith is constantly to be tempered and tested by an understanding and appreciation of history. This is not the narrow stubborn attitude which says "We have always done it this way" but rather it takes seriously our responsibility to interpret the faith in a way which is reasonable and understandable to the ordinary people of our generation.

When in the 16th. century, Thomas Cranmer was Archbishop of Canterbury, he realised that the average church member could understand very little of what was going on in the Sunday worship. This was because the services were in Latin,

which was not the common language. So Cranmer set about translating the services into the common language which was used by the people. Hence the Book of Common Prayer was born. The Bible itself was also translated into the common language. In our time we have continued this tradition - namely the tradition of having our services in the common language - hence the Alternative Service Book. This is how Anglican tradition works.

Anglicans therefore have a distinctive approach to the Bible. We subscribe to no great individual teacher such as Wesley, Calvin or Luther. We claim no infallibility such as the Pope or even the Bible. If anyone asks us what we believe as members of the Church of England, we can say: "If you want to understand us then come and pray with us. We are not possessed by certainty, but we are fellow pilgrims on a journey of faith."

AMEN