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## *Digestion*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
Proper 28 – Year C**

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.* (The Collect of Proper 28, from *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979).

Was anyone listening a few minutes ago, when the priest prayed “The Collect of the Day?” The Collect of the Day is the prayer in our Sunday service that comes just before our first scripture reading. It is towards the beginning of the service, and it is usually designed to set the tone of the day.

Sometimes the tone of the day is easy to understand: it is Christmas or Easter or something! And the Collect of the Day is striking and beautiful. Often, however, these Collects of the Day are quite forgettable.

Then, there is today’s “Collect of the Day,” which often causes a curious smile on those who are listening. It starts, “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...”

Some of those admonitions about Bible study are familiar to us. “Read the Bible!” we hear. “Mark it up!” “Learn the Bible!” We have heard such directions often. But digest them? Inwardly digest them? Let’s consider that. My sermon for today is about digestion.

Apparently, this prayer was written for the 1549 Prayer Book, one of the first prayer books of the English Reformation, when the reformers were urging, and trying to frame, a return to reading the entire Bible. Not just parts of the Bible. Apparently, in some places, there were so many saints being remembered, every day, that the regular course of reading the Bible – in a sort of ongoing, daily pattern—was being interrupted too often.

So, the new lectionaries, including that of 1549, set out forms of reading longer sections of the Bible – reading passages straight through.

I like the idea. I like reading the Bible in its entirety, straight through various books, instead of just skipping to the parts we understand or agree with. One reason I like this practice is because it teaches me, it *shows* me, that not all parts of the Bible should be understood, or even accepted, in the same way. Try it for yourself!

I follow my Lord, Jesus Christ, in this manner of Bible interpretation, a method that honors some texts more than others. When someone asked Jesus which commandment in the Law was the greatest, Jesus did not say, “Well, they are all equally important.” No, he said there are two that are the greatest: Love God and love your neighbor. The greatest studies of scripture continue to produce that conclusion.

Again: some parts of the Bible really are more important than others; and the best way to understand this, is to actually read the Bible! This is my practice when I lead the various Bible studies of the Cathedral. When we gather in those classes, we actually read books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, straight through. Sometimes the reading is a bit boring. Sometimes it is wild and illogical. In that reading, however, we realize, quite spiritually, that some parts of the Bible are way more valuable than others.

In fact, I would claim that this way of reading the Bible is the only way to understand today's prayer, this "Collect of the Day," which says we should digest scripture. I do not want to be too graphic here; but think about that word, "digest." To digest something is to consume something so that our body appreciates and keeps the valuable parts, but expels and gets rid of the other parts. Get it? Good Bible study digests scripture, getting nourishment from the valuable bits, but letting the other bits pass right on through!

Consider today's gospel, the words of Jesus. Today's text is part of the so-called apocalyptic theme of scripture, a theme that appears occasionally throughout the Bible. We think of these passages as "end-time" passages. The Old Testament Book of Daniel contained wild images of the end times, full of beasts and bronzes, rams and goats, and desolating sacrileges. The Book of Ezekiel did, too, with Gog and Magog. And today, in Luke 21, even Jesus speaks words of end-time destruction and warning.

Finally, of course, the grand master of all end-time literature is that last book of scripture, The Revelation to John. Indeed, my Bible study classes this past fall, have chosen that very book, The Revelation to John, as our book to read. I warned them not to read it! But they did! I have described that book as a set of illogical and inconsistent dreams that the writer delivers to those who are suffering persecution and distress.

The Revelation to John is similar to a wild dream, or even a nightmare, that wakes you up at night. You have dreamed of something truly weird, like seven seals, and four horses, and dragons and beasts and a lewd woman of Babylon. It is all so clear! You wake up in the middle of the night, and write down your dream. It makes sense. But, the next day, when you read what you have written down, it makes no logical or systematic sense at all. That is the Book of Revelation.

For me, however, there are yet two redeeming features in such end-times writing. One feature is its repetitive instruction in the midst of continuous expressions of confusion, vivid fear, and urgency. The Revelation to John repeats, over and over again, "Those who endure to the end will be saved. Hang on. Hang in there." It is the same thing we say to each other when we are in pain. Those who endure to the end will be saved. "You will be saved," says the book. In fact, that instruction to endure is exactly what Jesus says, today, in his little Apocalypse. "By your endurance, you will save your souls" (Luke 21:19).

The second feature, the second redeeming feature of the Book of Revelation is its wild and rich description of heaven, and the throne in heaven, a glorious altar surrounded by singing angels, saints, and martyrs. At the center of that heavenly altar are not the violent symbols of worldly power, like lions and horses, or weapons and missiles, but a lamb. In fact, at the center is a slaughtered lamb, who turns out to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Christians who endure to the end will not be those who worship the violent and oppressive power of this world, but those who worship lambs, those who have suffered, those who are singing.

Our Collect of the Day says, "Grant that we may so hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest scripture." Some parts of scripture have the vitamins and proteins we need to thrive! Other parts are the rough fiber, that have a function, but which are best allowed to pass right through our system.

This sermon is about digestion.

Do not be led astray by wars and destruction. Sadly, those features of our world have been with us throughout human history. There are few times in human history without violence. Our role will be to be the peacemakers in those times, over and over again, enduring to the end.

Do not be led astray by earthquakes and floods and moons that seem to be blood red. Again, those features of our world have been with us throughout history, not just human history, but earth's history.

Jesus says that many will come and say, "I am he," and "The time is near." "Do not go after them," he says.

The Jesus we follow is the one who behaves completely differently from the powers of this world. In the midst of war, there will be Jesus making peace. Follow that Jesus. In the midst of those creating terror and confusion, there will be Jesus creating steady calm. Follow that Jesus. In the midst of lies, there will be Jesus speaking the truth. Follow that Jesus. In the midst of those creating hate, there will be Jesus creating love. Follow that Jesus.

Holy Scripture contains all sorts of those things, even the bad things. Our Holy Scripture, the Bible, is a collection of sixty-six very different books, written, probably, over a one thousand year span. Scripture includes most every behavior and event we can imagine. Different parts of scripture have different purposes. There is no way that every verse can be understood, or used, in the exactly the same way. Instead, scripture is meant to be digested.

The parts of Scripture that endure to the end, the parts of Scripture that nourish our souls, will be those which inspire love and peace, those who provide a heavenly vision of saints and angels singing glory to God in heaven.

AMEN.

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