

**Back to the Bible**  
**Synod of the Diocese of Yukon**  
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**By Archdeacon Sean Murphy**

The email I and a few others received a few days ago was just what I needed to hear before sitting down to write this report. A woman who comes to our Tuesday Lunch - Time Bible Study, attended by members of Northern Apostles, the Cathedral and others, wrote of our recent meeting: "What a great Bible Study!! It charged me for the day!! much thanks..."

Short and to the point, but always music to a pastor's ears! I am confident that everyone in our group would echo her thoughts. It was once again so encouraging to meet as a small group over lunch, study the epistle text for the coming Sunday, and share concerns and pray at the end. And so the comments of that email, and I have heard many similar ones over the years, reinforce my deep conviction about the value of Bible Study and the power of God's Word to change our lives.

The theme of our Synod is "Getting back to the Basics" and one of the basics we come back to, which I have been asked to speak on, is the Bible. The Bible is true and eternal, God's Word written. As God spoke through His Word in biblical times so he speaks to us today in His Word. The psalmist says it so well, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105 NIV). What a joy it is as a pastor to see the difference scripture makes when people come to Christ and begin to read, study and apply God's Word to their lives.

There is of course so much that could be said about the Bible. In this short report I don't try to do too much, but simply share my convictions under three general headings. You may or may not agree with me, and that's OK; we do not all share the same view of the Bible and its role in our Church and in our lives. I speak only of what I believe can be defended from scripture and of what I trust will be helpful as we seek to understand and obey the Bible in our ministry and mission together.

**1. The Biblical Heritage of the Anglican Church**

As a Church our heritage has been to affirm the authority and inspiration of Holy Scripture. We are, and always have been, a scriptural people. The Christ-centered, trinitarian, creedal theology of Anglicanism is deeply rooted in the Bible. Our Articles of religion uphold the authority and trustworthiness of God's Word. Sunday by Sunday we gather to hear God's Word read and proclaimed, and we worship in liturgy, traditional and modern, literally permeated with biblical passages and references. More could be said, too. We are a blessed people to have such a heritage. Let's not forget that. Years ago as a young Christian I remember being inspired by a comment of Stephen Neill in his book Anglicanism, about how he could be an Anglican because in our Church he did not have to believe anything that could not be substantiated by scripture. I

agreed with Neill then and I still do, and I hope and trust that I will be able to say the same thing in the future.

Now it is true that in many quarters we face challenges to, even ridicule of, the authority of the Bible, from society as whole and even from within the Church. We all know that. The solid consensus, drawn from scripture, on essential or core doctrine, is breaking down, in some quarters very quickly; traditional moral teaching, long believed by the universal Church to be taught in the Bible, is under attack. Where are we headed and where will it all end? We don't know. We could bemoan the fact, get defensive about it and even feel threatened. I have seen all those reactions. But the best approach, it seems to me, is to press on with confidence to uphold the authority of scripture and teach the Word of God, "to contend," as Jude tells us, "for the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints" (v. 4 NIV). It is so important to come back to the Bible again and again, and to do all we can to help people where it is necessary, and as the Holy Spirit leads, to recapture a sense of the complete trustworthiness and authority of scripture for Christian living today.

## **2. The Authority and Inspiration of Scripture**

What to say under this heading. Volumes have been written about this topic, and I have thought so much about it, as many of us have, I'm sure. A few comments. Christianity is a revealed religion, a religion, it is sometimes said, of revelation not speculation. We cannot know an infinite God unless He reveals Himself to us, and He has. The God of the universe has revealed Himself in His Son Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, and in the written Word. You cannot separate the Incarnate Word and the written Word. It is my conviction, and observation too, that the key factor in our approach to the Bible's authority is always going to be our view of Jesus. Jesus is the centre of the biblical story, the divine Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. The Bible is so clear in its testimony that Jesus is our Lord and the unique and only Saviour of the world, who died on the cross for our sins and rose again. There is no other Saviour (John 14:6, Acts 4:12). Faith in Christ is the pathway to God, to forgiveness and a relationship with Him. Where this supremacy of Jesus is denied, I often observe a very sceptical and dismissive attitude to the Bible and even departure from the faith, which really concerns me. But where Jesus is acknowledged and honoured for who He truly is, I see more appreciation of the greatness of the Bible and disciples who are willing to obey whatever it says. As people come to Jesus, and get serious about Him, they come to scripture.

A related point in this discussion is that we should take seriously scripture's testimony to itself – that's only reasonable- and to especially observe our Lord's attitude to the Bible. The Bible consistently testifies to its own divine inspiration and authority. Paul speaks of Old Testament scripture in 2 Timothy as being "God-breathed" (3: 16 NIV), and Peter writes of the prophets being "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 2:21NIV). Furthermore, Jesus Himself promised the Holy Spirit and made provision for the accurate recollection and transmission of His teaching, and so for the divine inspiration of the New Testament (John 14:25-26; 15:26). And there are more scriptures on this matter. The point is this: we cannot take the Bible's understanding of its own authority lightly. If not the Bible's view if itself, then whose view do we follow?

And what about our Lord's view of the Bible. Jesus sees Himself in the Old Testament and patterns His own messiahship in terms of its prophetic teaching. He submits to scripture. He repeatedly appeals to the Word of God and regards it at every turn as entirely trustworthy and reliable. His approach to scripture is impossible to miss. I have been to seminary and read a number of books on the subject but I am yet to be convinced that I should take any other approach to the Bible than the one demonstrated by our Lord. How about you?

Another point. The Bible is both thoroughly human, and thoroughly divine. God reveals Himself through human authors with strengths and weaknesses just like you and me, and He reveals Himself in history. This is amazing and causes us to scratch our heads and struggle sometimes with the earthiness of what we sometimes read. Why is this included? What's going on here? are questions we often ask. But through the Holy Spirit, who works in the lives of the biblical authors and superintends what they write, God insures that His Word is self-consistent and true. Would we expect the God of the universe to leave us a record which we could not trust, which is filled with error and contradiction? I hardly think so.

So these are my thoughts about the authority of the Bible. This means that human reason and the tradition of the Church find their proper place. They are important, but not on the level of the Bible. The Bible is supreme and preeminent for Christian faith and living. But let me get back to my next point. When we settle the matter of authority then we can move to interpretation, and not the other way around. If we adopt the view of authority that I have outlined, and I hope that we do, then a few things follow. We come to scripture with a humble and prayerful attitude - this is such a key -and we work hard in our study to understand what the Bible meant in its original context, so we can then apply the Bible to our lives today. As we do so, we avail ourselves of all the tools and resources of scholarship that are available to us. As Anglicans we do not park our brains outside when we come to Church. Also, we come to the Word in the confidence that scripture will help us to interpret scripture and be in harmony with itself. How often have I come to an apparent problem in the Bible only to see it resolved after considering other scriptures on the same subject and also the story of the Bible as a whole. Finally, we trust the Holy Spirit, the author of scripture, to shine His light on the passage we are reading to help us understand and respond today.

### **3. Personal and Group Bible Study**

I have found it crucial, in personal devotion, to develop a consistent pattern of Bible study. I have been faithful in this regard at certain times in my ministry, but not at others. But by the grace of God I keep trying. There is just no substitute for spending time in the Bible. I am at my strongest when take the time in the Word, and weaker and less effective when I don't. I'm sure you can say the same. A well balanced spiritual diet must have the Bible in it. The Bible is spiritual nourishment and food, along, of course, with prayer and the sacraments. Moses, in a passage Jesus quotes to resist the devil, says 'man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3 NIV).

There are numerous good resources out there to help us grow in Bible reading, understanding and application. The NIV Study Bible, my staple for years, and the newer ESV Study Bible, are

superb. Our Daily Bread and Scripture Union are good resources for establishing a daily quiet time in God's Word. And there are many more.

It is important to pray before we read, and to let the passage speak to us in a personal way. I am sure you have had the experience, as I have many times, of how God will bring to mind a passage you have read in the morning in some event or circumstance of your day. God longs to do this, and to guide and encourage us in this way, but we need to put the Word of God in our hearts and minds first.

One simple but helpful pattern for Bible reading, which I commend to you, is the one used for the Gospel reading in the Disciple's Prayer Book, produced by the US Episcopal Church. We often use this booklet in diocesan gatherings. The three questions for reflection and response to the Gospel are: "What word(s), idea(s), or sentence(s) stand out for you in the Gospel of the Day." "What is Jesus (the Gospel) saying to you?" And, "What is Jesus(the Gospel) calling you to do?" This is a helpful approach that can be used in personal and group study. However we do it, it is important for us to regularly spend time in Bible reading and study, that the living Lord of scripture might strengthen us to serve Him today.

A last comment about Bible Study in groups. There is something we get studying the Bible in a group that we can't get when we are alone. We test our own views and thoughts with what others say and with the teaching that is given. God the Holy Spirit speaks to us together. We share in fellowship and support one another in prayer. We are built up as we meet together in the Word. It is my undeniable experience as a Pastor over the years that the people I have seen grow the most are those that have met during the week in small groups, usually studying the Bible. I pray that many more people in our parishes would meet in small groups to study the Bible in the coming year.

Again, there are many resources to help us with small group Bible study. I have found studies from Inter Varsity Press helpful over the years. I understand that Crossways International produces some good material. The Alpha follow-up course called A Life Worth Living, used here at the Cathedral a few years ago, is an excellent in - depth study of Philippians. And there is so much more, in print and online, that God has provided to help us grow in Christian maturity through the Word of God.

In conclusion, our heritage as Anglicans is to be a biblical people, and so be orthodox in our faith. We have a lot to be thankful for. As we acknowledge Jesus as the supreme and only Saviour, uphold the inspiration, authority and trustworthiness of scripture, and take seriously the reading and study of God's Word, good things are sure to happen. In response to the Gospel, we are led out in mission to the world. We grow as disciples as we make Jesus known to our communities and God is glorified.

Archdeacon Sean Murphy