

Hear, Read, Mark, Learn, and Inwardly Digest

When I was sharing a prison ministry at a minimum security prison near Louisburg, North Carolina, during the 1980s, our group used to offer both prayer services—we did a form of Compline—and Bible study. I brought my study Bible, which looked more or less like this one. One of the prisoners, a guy from Baltimore named Roosevelt Trueman—a memorable name—said to me, “That there is no Bible.” I asked why. He said, “My grand-daddy is a preacher, and his Bible don’t look like what you got there.” I dug down in my basket, pulled out a Bible that looks like this, and said, “Is this like your grandfather’s Bible?” He said enthusiastically, “Yes, Ma’am! Now, THAT’S a Bible.”

We invest familiar objects with meaning. The Bible that had meaning for Roosevelt was black leather, flexible and something he saw often in his grandfather’s hands. A small portion of the words in the Bible were ones he knew because he had heard his grandfather read them aloud. Roosevelt himself did not read the Bible because he had dyslexia (as do many people who are incarcerated). For him, the Bible was a meaningful symbol, but not because it was the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures of which the catechism in the Book of Common Prayer speaks, “...because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible.” He saw the Bible as a beloved object in a particular form, associated with someone he loved.

Many people today regard the Bible as a quaint artefact from a time—and a spiritual path—gone by. But what it is, is powerful. It is a concentration of spiritual energy that gives life to our own spiritual pilgrimage to closer connection with the Divine. However a Bible may look—like a textbook with extensive notes, or like a sacred object bound in leather with pages edged in gilt—it is not its appearance that is important to our growth in wisdom, love, and understanding. It is what is inside the covers that matters.

The Bible is not an idol. Those who put it in the place of the One who inspired it make a mistake. The Bible is the inspired work of humans, not handed over intact to humans by God. We make an idolatrous mistake if we think every word in the Bible is factual. The writers were human beings with a deep longing to share their understanding of God and God’s influence in human life. But they were not infallible, nor did they have any intention of putting together an assemblage of facts. They were sharing with us their understanding of the truth, and they used metaphor, simile, ancient stories and contemporary events to convey that truth.

Today’s scriptures are strong reminders that we have been given spiritual energy to use for holy purposes, and we had better take that gift seriously. Do I really think that God will throw those who do not use that energy intentionally into outer darkness? That doesn’t match up with the God of love and mercy that Jesus describes. However, I believe that we can separate ourselves from God simply by turning away, by forgetting that God has been our refuge from one generation to another.

I heard a radio preacher describing plagues of the past and saying that they come as punishment from God, as does the corona virus. I don’t see it that way. I see that one of the ways we have

turned away from God is in our failures of stewardship with the beautiful and incredibly complex world that we have been given. We exploit animals, and keep them in conditions in which disease transmission is not a punishment but an inevitable result of crowding and inhumane use. And then, we have the colossal nerve to call a pandemic an act of God. The infinitely complex and exquisitely tuned creation described in the first chapter of the book of Genesis is out of balance and out of tune, and our actions have caused that imbalance.

The Bible tells time and again of human error that shapes catastrophe. Often, the catastrophe has to do with human arrogance, with action that does not take into consideration God's creation, the well-being that results when we realize that we are not just stewards of God's creation, but part of that creation.

Now is a good time to get to know the Bible better. If we realize that our days are numbered, that we are not going to live forever, then we seek to apply our hearts to wisdom. Even if we have made mistakes, or been dishonest or hurtful in the past, we can still seek to learn more about God and God's will for us. We can still use what God has given us, and amplify it. To be a good and trustworthy servant is no small thing.

In this Advent season to come, so teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom, and to the Love that Jesus Christ incarnated when he came to live among us.

AMEN.