

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger William Smith on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

From my heart

This morning Jack Nietert and I ask you to join us in celebrating the anniversary of our ordination to the priesthood. Jack was ordained 44 years ago, and, God help us, it was 56 years ago when I was ordained. We were both ordained on December 21st, the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle.

During the course of the service, the bishop asked us:

“Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain all doctrine required as necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined, out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge; and to teach nothing, as necessary to eternal salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by Scripture?”

Later in the service the question asked was: “Will you be diligent in your prayers, and in reading the Holy Scriptures, and in such studies as help to the knowledge of the same...”

To both questions, Jack and I promised that we would endeavor so to do, the Lord being our helper.

One year the pastor of the local Community Church in the Adirondack village, where we live in the summer, invited a number of clergy residing in the area to give a little talk which he called “From my heart”. Each Sunday one of us walked up to the front of the church and gave a little confession about what came from our hearts.

In view of the questions about the Scriptures that were asked of Jack and me on the day we were ordained, I'd like to tell you what I said to the congregation of that Community Church a couple of summers ago.

“What I am about to share with you,” said I, “comes from my heart. My text.... is from the 119th Psalm: Addressing God, the poet says, ‘Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path.’” (vs. 105)

For a number of years now I have accepted a rule of life, which includes what in my tradition we call reading the Daily Office.

This is a matter of reading the Psalms, lessons from the Old and New Testaments, Canticles and the prayers that are appointed for the morning and the evening of each day. By the end of the year, this discipline puts the reader in touch with all of those parts of the Bible that are worth reading and offers the opportunity to pray for everything and everyone that might require such an offering.

Those of you who are familiar with The Book of Common Prayer know that these daily offices are called Morning Prayer (or Matins) and Evening Prayer (or Evensong).

The central feature of these offices is the reading of the psalms. By the end of each 6 week period one will have read all 150 of them. As I read them, I am inspired to recall that the psalms were the hymns and prayers that Jesus used.

Jesus rarely quoted scripture, but on the day he died, he quoted the psalms twice: Mark and Matthew record him as crying out in agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That is the first line of Psalm 22.

Luke tells us that before he died Jesus quoted Psalm 31, saying to the Father, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." That is a prayer of trust.

The psalms express the full gamut of human experience., agony and trust, love and hate. The writer of some of them seems to be almost paranoid. We are familiar with that line from the 23rd psalm, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." That is one of more than 3 dozen times that the composers of the psalms express fear of their enemies.

Other psalms express violent anger. Whoever wrote Psalm 137 was enraged at the Babylonians who had destroyed Jerusalem and enslaved its citizens: "O daughter of Babylon," he cries, "you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back for what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" Whoever said that must've been really angry. He probably felt like President Bush did when he stood amidst the rubble of the World Trade Towers.

Some of the psalms are expressions of remorse. Psalm 51: "I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me." Others express the way one might feel when getting up to behold a beautiful morning here in the Low Country. "Bless the Lord, O my soul... who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, and who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagles." Those are words from Psalm 103.

In the psalms we find expressions of great love and adoration, great optimism (Let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation, Ps 95) and great despair (Darkness if my only companion, Ps 88). They are poetic expressions about what it means to be human.

The tradition is that David wrote the psalms. Maybe he did. We know that he lived to be about 70, which in his day was a very long life. There are several psalms that express the indignities that often accompany old age. At this stage in my life, I especially like those. In Psalm 71 he writes, "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent." "While I kept silence," he cries out in the night, "my bones waxed old." That's the King James translation. The new translation says, "My body is wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer."

These are poems of empathy that can be consoling. So I can say to myself, "Cheer up, old man, you're not alone in those long, sweaty nights. Even the greatest of kings have been there."

So there you have a glimpse of what reading the Daily Office means to me. It keeps me in touch with the Scriptures and thus ever closer to you and to our Creator

My various stages in reading the Bible have been a kind of pilgrimage. When I was very young my only exposure to the Bible was what I heard read in church, most of which I did not understand and, therefore, did not listen to. When I was a freshman in college, my history teacher assigned his class the reading of The Book of The Acts of the Apostles. I tried to get through it, but I never finished. I was 17 and just not interested. Of course, when I entered seminary I had to read the Bible, but I did so half-heartedly. Then about 20 years later

I went to a conference lead by the great Episcopalian musician/evangelist Terry Fulham, and my eyes were opened (maybe I should say my heart was opened) to the great treasures to be found in the Scriptures. I went home to my parish in Wayland, Mass. and started a Class for the study of the Bible, and I have been part of such a group in all of the years since.

The Bible does three things for me:

1. As I said earlier, it brings me closer to God, what God is like and what God wants me to be like.
2. I am an esthetic person... I have discovered that reading the Bible as poetry can be like listening to a symphony, hearing a great opera, or walking through an art gallery. From my heart, may I beseech you to read the Bible as poetry, not history. Nor is the Bible to be looked to as a manual for good behavior. Reading it should be like listening to beautiful music or looking at a great painting.

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet, I tell you, even Solomon in all of his glory was not clothed like one of these.” (Matt. 6:28)

Though I might speak with tongues of men and of angels, and not love, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” (1 Cor. 13:1)

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created human kind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth....’” (Genesis 1:26-28a)

Don't lay verses like those along side Darwin. Set them to music!

3. Finally, the Bible brings me closer to you. When I experience moments of euphoria, I know that Peter and Paul, David and Moses, Sarah & Mary did too, and so must you. If I have down days, like King David did, I am pretty sure you also know about that. If you become angry with me, the Bible can help me figure out why. If we become depressed or despairing, we know we are not alone. When old age has us in its grip... oh well, so what else is new?!

From my heart, I confess that sometimes I lose patience with our church. I grow weary of its rituals and rigormarole, not to mention the political posturing of our prelates and priests. I am mortified by the ways in which religious zeal has brought so much pain to the human family. I long for the day when we might less fervent about being religious and more eager to listen to what Jesus has to teach us—a day when religious people are less militant and more compassionate.

When all of the institutions of God and country crumble and fall, we will still be able to take comfort and find strength in reading the everlasting Word of God, which is a lantern to our feet and a light upon our path.
Amen