

## Advent II

*Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour (the Collect)*

This sermon assumes an additional reading from II Esdras 14.19-26 (in the Apocrypha); compare also the work of Ezra recorded in Nehemiah 8.

II Esdras dates from about 100 AD - probably the youngest book in the whole Bible, including the New Testament! But what it tries to do is to apply the person and work of the historical Ezra (say 450 BC) to the situation of the Jews in 100 AD, with the Temple again destroyed and much of their old way of practising the faith again lost (no sacrifices, many rites of purity impossible).

The recovery of the text of the Old Testament (and other books!) in the time of Ezra is a legend - the destroying of copies of the Law came later, under Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC. But it is a very perceptive legend. Some scholars would, only half in jest, say that Ezra was the author of the five Books of Moses as we have them. Certainly, it is from that time that the Old Church (the Jews) became a People of the 24 Books as they count the Old Testament. (Each book was, as they experienced it, roughly the same size and shape as a roll of very heavy wallpaper.)

Not, however, a people of private reading and study. All the emphasis is on public reading in the Assembly (which is what "synagogue" means) with translation if needed and explanation. Compare Luke 4.16-30.

I am not for one moment saying that private copies of the Bible and private reading are wrong - just reminding you that cheap books and widespread literacy only came into this country just over a century ago and still have not reached much of the world. The Gospel has flourished and can flourish without them.

So the readings in Church are very important and have a long tradition behind them. But we must be quite careful about what we are doing.

Of course we are reminding ourselves of essential information about God. But you could do that for yourselves at home. That may be an essential starting point - but the important issue is not just where you start from but what use you make of it. That is why the collect moves inexorably to the "blessed hope of everlasting life". We read now so that we will be able to enjoy God for ever.

There is an odd sense in which we are reminding God! Not that he needs to know, but this paradox shows that we come to God in Church on the terms which he has set before us in his words (the Bible) and his holy Word (our Saviour, see John 1.1).

We come asking that his Word may give spirit and life to the words, as a means of God blessing us. We ask him to open our eyes.

So yes we are People of the Book and we do and should read the Bible. Those who make that reading the centre of their prayer are not wrong - though it was not always the way for most and it may still not be the way for everybody. It is still a wise rule to pray as you can, not as you can't.

Advent is the time before all of hope - of hope that we will come to enjoy God for ever, of hope that God will come to impose his authority on the mess of the current world, of hope that our Saviour's birth has made this possible. We are called on to "embrace and ever hold fast that blessed hope".