

THE BIBLE

Returning to Cranmer's collect, we should note how it assumes that, in addition to hearing Scripture read publicly, Anglicans will also "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" Scripture. Regular exposure to Scripture through private, prayerful meditation is treated as vital. To mark Scripture, for Cranmer, was to recognize the way that Scripture is a vast network of interconnections and associations, a richly textured harmony.

Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt in the Book of Exodus, for example, foreshadows Israel's later return from exile in Babylon in the latter portions of the Book of Isaiah. The crowning of David as Israel's king in 2 Samuel similarly points ahead to Jesus' enthronement as the true son of God in the four Gospels. By reading Scripture in such a way, Cranmer and other Anglicans have assumed the coherence of the Bible; in the words of the Thirty-nine Articles, we ought not "so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another" (Article 20: "Of the Authority of the Church"). Scripture's two testaments belong together: both witness to the saving acts of God on behalf of Israel and the Church, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Cranmer's collect finishes by noting the spiritual goal of Christians' engagement with Scripture: "that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life." Ultimately, the purpose of Scripture is not to teach believers correct information — least of all

about science or other modern areas of learning. Rather, Scripture is the companion of those who wish to know and love God more. It is less like a manual or a textbook and more like a sheaf of traveling songs to be memorized and ruminated on as believers make their pilgrim way to the heavenly city of God. As Scripture expresses it in a prayer of gratitude (Ps. 119:105):

**"Your word is a lantern to my feet
and a light upon my path."**



**What is the Bible for,
and how do Anglican
Christians read it?**



We are a Christian ministry based primarily in the Episcopal Church, a member of the Anglican Communion. Since 1878 we have published educational resources of various kinds and *The Living Church* magazine.

The Bible is a diverse collection of 66 books written over the course of over 1000 years. It contains poetry, history, prayers, prophecy, and much else. But what is the Bible for, and how do Anglican Christians read it?

One of Thomas Cranmer's collects from the Book of Common Prayer, originally prayed on the Second Sunday of Advent, reveals much about Anglican attitudes to Scripture: "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."

As we consider what Anglicans believe about the Bible, several features of this prayer stand out. First of all, God is identified as the one who caused Scripture — the Old and New Testaments — to be written. Scripture, in other words, whatever its human origins, has its ultimate source in God. As one portion of the New Testament says about the Old, "All scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Inspiration is one of the primary characteristics that Anglicans in the past, and indeed many other sorts of Christians, have attributed to the Bible. It is a way of safeguarding the conviction that the Bible is not to be understood as a record of human religious ingenuity or questing; it is, rather, God's self-communication "for our learning" (cf. Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:16). As the late Reformed theologian John Webster expressed it, "[T]he biblical texts are creaturely realities set apart by the triune God to serve his self-presence." God moves

toward us first in revelation, not we, in directionless speculation, toward God.

Cranmer's collect continues with a request: "Grant us ... to hear [the Scriptures], read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them." The sequence here is important. The collect assumes that our first encounter with Scripture will be through our ears, presumably in the context of public worship. And indeed this is the regular Anglican experience. Each Sunday, in the service of Holy Communion, we hear a portion of the Old Testament, the Psalms, a segment of an epistle from the New Testament, and a passage from one of the four Gospels read aloud, followed by a homily that seeks to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ from one or more of these readings, after which, using the words of the Nicene Creed, we confess our trust in the Triune God who is Scripture's true subject matter.

What this implies is that we encounter Scripture first and fundamentally in the specific context of eucharistic worship. As Robert Jenson once put it, the Bible "comes together in and for the Church." Although the Bible may be read and studied elsewhere, Christians assume that its home, so to speak, is the Church. The Church is where Scripture is read and expounded. Indeed, the very notion of a fixed canon

of Scripture — a list of books the sum of which is understood to be the complete Bible — owes its existence to the early Christians' need to know which books were suitable for public reading in the context of worship.

Therefore, attempts to separate Scripture from the Church — for instance, by dissecting it in a modern university context — may prove illuminating in certain respects, but they ultimately grasp only part of what the Bible actually is. This is why, for instance, when Lancelot Andrewes, the great 17th-century bishop in the Church of England, wished to talk about the theological norms for Anglican faith and practice, he cited Scripture first but also placed it in the context of the Church's early creeds and standards: "One canon reduced to writing by God himself, two testaments, three creeds, four general councils, five centuries, and the series of Fathers in that period — the centuries that is, before Constantine, and two after, determine the boundary of our faith." Scripture may be the ultimate norm for Christian faith and practice, but it is not to be read in isolation from its accompanying traditions of worship, ritual, and catechesis, or apart from the Church's reading of Scripture in the past.

