

Advent II Sermon 2 by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

Bishop of Saskatchewan

From Contempt of thy holy Word and Commandment,
Good Lord deliver us.

Let this be our prayer today and in the coming months:
“From contempt of thy Word and Commandment, Good Lord deliver us.” Now, the ways in which God’s Word and his holy Commandments are held in contempt by even the church in our day are several. There is the deceit that the Old Testament has no moral authority over Christians; the rejection of the Christian New Testament and traditional reading of the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets; the constant attacks on the authority of the Epistles of Paul; and the attempts at discrediting the New Testament Gospels by well paid seminary professors who long ago fell out of love with Jesus, and by popular writers who make money by twisting the Word of God.

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Attempts at discrediting the Word of God are not new. It was Satan's first device, even in the Garden of Eden: "Yea hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" Did God really say this? In that scene, the devil twists God's Word and Commandment, makes it appear unreasonable, and makes it look like an obstacle to our true freedom and happiness. The result of disobeying God's Word, instead, was slavery and misery.

But there is another contempt, more subtle and to which we are all prone, and that is simply to regard the Bible as irrelevant. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that his words, their authority, truth and relevance, will not pass away. St. Paul argues that even the Old Testament is not only for Jews or Israel, but for all peoples. He puts forth the Scriptures as a Book of hope, for all peoples. Summarily, our readings today tell us that the Bible is a Book of Hope for all peoples and all ages.

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The key to understanding and appreciating the universal and abiding relevance of the Scriptures, is to allow them, in fact to expect them, to speak to you. So Paul says, “these things written before were written for you.” We read today from the Epistle to the Romans, but in Paul’s letter to the Romans, we know the Word of God to this congregation here today, calling all the nations together in our common hope, to praise the one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We read, as well, what Jesus said to his first students, but we hear him say to us here today, “lift up your heads, your redemption draweth nigh.” His words are for and to this generation, and every generation. The Bible has been written for us and for our salvation, for us to hear and read and learn and take in, so that we might hold onto and never let go of, the hope of life in Jesus Christ.

You know when the phone rings and we answer it, after we have found out who’s calling and with whom they wish to

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speaking, we often say, “It’s for you.” That is what I want to tell you and hope that you can know today about God’s Word in the Bible: “It’s for you.”

But let me, on this Sunday, also outline what our church teaches about the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God written. It has a divine authority, for we recognize in it, by the grace of the Holy Spirit in us, a divine authorship. The sheep know and hear the Good Shepherd speaking to them by these words. These are the words of Moses and Jeremiah, of John and Peter, of Hannah and James, of Deborah and Paul, and supremely of Jesus. These words were written down by the likes of Baruch and Mark and Tertius, but we recognize that these have been spoken and written by men and women as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

And we give the first place of authority to this Word of God written. We require and demand in our fellowship nothing as

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necessary to salvation, which cannot be proved clearly from it, and in all else we seek to maintain the greatest amount of liberty possible. While there are two Testaments, and more than sixty books in the Bible, we acknowledge it as one and whole, the Word of God written. We refuse to interpret one part as contradicting another, and we read it instead as a whole, paying particular attention to how it interprets itself. This Word of God written, we acknowledge as a doctrinal instrument of salvation. That is, it contains that which can make us wise unto salvation. It is all you need to know to be saved. While it contains biology and history and genealogy and philosophy, these are brought into the service of theology. In these varied human words, we hear and read the Word of God.

Finally, we know that the unity and harmony of all these Scriptures is to be found in Jesus Christ. He is the Word of God incarnate, the fullness of God's self-revelation. Jesus is the

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beginning and the end of the Scriptures. He is the beginning, in whom God made the heaven and the earth (Genesis 1.1), and his grace is with his saints in the end (Revelation 22.21). He is the second Adam, the righteous Abel, the ram caught in the thicket, the Passover lamb, the scapegoat, the manna, the Prophet, the Lord whom we choose to serve, the Judge of all, Ruth's descendant, the rod of Jesse, the son of David, the Temple of God, and that only takes us to Chronicles in the Old Testament. He speaks and is spoken of in all the Psalms, he is Wisdom of God, and all the prophets bears witness to him. He is the subject of the whole of the New Testament, which begins with his four authorized biographies, and then records the continuing story of the Apostles he called, and the Church which is his body, provides again letters from these his Apostles and concludes with a vision of his reign.

Now, if all this exalted talk of the Bible sounds to you like

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fundamentalism, I will gladly accept the intended insult, for that is quite often how those who seek to honour the Word and Commandment of God are caricatured in our part of the Church. But this is not fundamentalism at all. It is, rather, Anglicanism - a traditional reading of Scripture, which reads the Bible with special attention to the early Fathers and Church, and with the help of the Creeds and the theology of the whole Church.

Many congregations in our Diocese offer the chance to get together for Bible Studies through the week. We also gather on Sundays for the public reading of God's Word. When you combine that with reading the daily Morning and Evening Prayer lectionary lessons of the Book of Common Prayer, we have the chance to read through most of the Old Testament once, the whole of the New Testament once, and much of it three times over, as well as reading through the Psalms twelve times in the year. Following these readings together is a

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deliberate recognition that no scripture is a matter of private interpretation, and a deliberate attempt at reading the Scriptures with the whole Church, in every place and age.

The neglect of the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer lessons and prayers, including the regular reading of the Bible, is one of the roots of all our troubles and conflicts these days. This Daily Office is the duty of all ordained persons, but it is your privilege to be able to join in this cycle of worship, both here and at home. When I think of liturgical renewal, I think of Daily Morning and Evening Prayer, understood as the work of the whole people of God, neither priestly nor monastic, but part of the whole work of the whole body of Christ, the Church.

A more devout and disciplined attitude towards the Bible and Bible reading will not make us ranting fundamentalists full of hatred; rather, we will abound in hope. St. Paul tells us that

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the Bible is the Sword of the Spirit, and it is in one of the greatest and fiercest battles of our lives, against despair, against giving up, that we shall find this Sword of the Spirit, this book of hope indispensable. If we are to be ready for the coming of Jesus Christ, and to greet his Advent with hope, then we need to attend to these things written for our learning.