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The Second Sunday after Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday) 04/06/08

## TOO MANY BOOKS

ON this third Sunday of the Lord's Resurrection – the second after Easter – we acknowledge the fruit of Christ's Third Word from the Cross. Seeing his mother standing by the cross with the beloved disciple, Jesus told her (with reference to the beloved disciple), "Woman, behold thy son"; and then, to the beloved disciple, "behold thy mother" (John 19:25-27). In providential care for those he loves, he entrusts them to one another's watchful care, in a new spiritual family of common faith and mutual charity, which is the church. Today we celebrate the victory of the good shepherd, who by laying down his life for the sheep, creates and sustains the congregation (Latin for "flock") entrusted to his care. For because of his "bearing our sins in his own body upon the tree", we who were "as sheep going astray...are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls", as "one flock" under "one shepherd". We put our trust in his good shepherding, who is himself an example to us of trust in God's providence. For rather than railing against his enemies, he "committed himself to him that judgeth righteously", and that faith was not in vain. His resurrection is the victory of the loving providence of God by which all things in heaven and earth are governed, bringing good out of evil and life out of death: "The earth is full of the loving-kindness of the Lord, alleluia: by the word of the Lord were the heavens stablished, alleluia, alleluia" (Introit. Psalm 33. Misericordia Domini.)

## TOO MANY BOOKS

The Stoic author Seneca (a contemporary of Saint Paul) did not approve of reading many different authors and books – or rather, the practice of not reading them, but skipping from one to another, "making flying visits to them all" but never "acquiring an intimate acquaintance with any one great writer". "Food that is vomited up as soon as it is eaten" (a deplorable habit of Roman gourmands), "is not assimilated into the body and does not do one any good; nothing hinders a cure so much as frequent changes of treatment; a wound will not heal over if it is being made the subject of experiments with different ointments; a plant which is frequently moved never grows strong. Nothing is so useful that it can be of any service in the mere passing. A multitude of books only gets in one's way". His advice: "always read well-tried authors", "writers whose genius is unquestionable", "and if at any moment you find yourself wanting a

change from a particular author, go back to the ones you have read before”.

It is very good advice. I can't say that I live by it. I like nothing so much as acquiring more books, and find it very difficult to get rid of any. And I do skip from book to book. It is deplorable. There is one exception to my biblio-gourmandizing, and that is the Bible and the Prayer Book. When I began to be serious about the Christian religion, it was impressed upon me very strongly that I should take up the discipline of reading Morning and Evening Prayer every day (the daily "office" or duty of a priest), and with the usual wobbles I have done so ever since.

This has meant not only reading the psalms and prayers in the Prayer Book, but also reading the Bible in a systematic way over the course of each year, according to the lectionary (schedule of readings) printed in the Prayer Book. (There have been various versions of the daily office lectionary, each embodying Cranmer's principles. The current one, perhaps not the best revision, dates from 1943.)

Like any discipline, it can be a bit of a chore, and sometimes leaves me bored or confused. Yet like any discipline, the fruit it bears is undeniable. When I first began reading the Bible, I often found myself puzzled and confused. It seemed rather strange and sometimes indigestible, a kind of wilderness in which one could get lost. There are still times when I feel that way! But I have also seen this wilderness turn to paradise. For an Episcopalian, I have a fairly well stocked memory of Bible passages, which I can refer to without much trouble. More strikingly, I notice the slow growth of understanding. Passages that initially struck me as strange or opaque or puzzling now speak to me clearly and powerfully. In the filling of the memory and the illumination of the understanding, a foundation is laid for the purification of the will in prayer, which is the whole point. As Cranmer said, "In reading of God's Word, he most profiteth not always, that is most ready in turning of the book...; but he that is most turned into it, that is most inspired with the Holy Ghost, most in his heart and life altered, and transformed into that thing which he readeth".

To that end, Seneca adds this further counsel for our reading: "After running over a lot of different thoughts, pick out one to be digested thoroughly that day. This is what I do myself; out of many bits I have been reading I lay hold of one". What Seneca describes is the process of meditation, authorized by the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who "kept all these sayings" concerning her Son "in her heart", "and pondered them" (Luke 2:19, 51). In selecting this "thought for the day" from the reading or hearing of the daily office, we choose the scriptural word to which we will return over the course of the day through memorization, meditation, and prayer. "Lord, what love have I unto thy law! All the day long is my study of it" (Psalm 119:97). By this process, the fruits of reading the Word of God in the daily office are multiplied, and our own souls and lives conformed more fully to it. "Blessed is the man", says the psalmist, whose "delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law will he exercise himself [i.e. meditate] day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the water-side, that will bring forth his fruit in due season. His leaf also shall not wither; and look, whatsoever he doeth, it shall prosper". "Thy word have I hid within my heart, that I should not sin against thee" (Psalm 119:11).

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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