

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	25 October 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Last Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

Among the many Collects that we use in worship, today's is one of the most special. Let's hear it again:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

It was originally the old Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent in the Book of Common Prayer. Most of the Collects in the Prayer Book were translations by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer from the Latin ones that had been used in the Church for over a thousand years. But this Collect is not a translation. It is an original prayer composed by Cranmer for the very first Book of Common Prayer in 1549.

It has long been recognised as a masterpiece both for its English style and exemplification of the Collect form. But it is above all its theology and spirituality that make it so special. Cranmer's Collect answers exceptionally well a basic question: 'When I open the Bible to read and pray, what should I do?'

It is in fact a summary of a thousand years of Christian tradition of prayerful reading of the Bible – a tradition formed in the monasteries of England. Ironically, Cranmer assisted in the destruction of those very monasteries, a move initiated by Henry VIII, who dissolved them brutally. But let's return to that near the end. Instead let's concentrate on why this prayer is such an excellent guide to reading and praying with the Bible.

First however we need to question what we mean when we say, 'The Bible' because the singular form of that word can create false impressions. In the Greek language the word used to describe the Jewish and Christian Holy Books – biblia - was plural not singular. It referred to books, not just a single book, because there is no single book.

In fact, what is now popularly called the Bible – a singular word, suggesting a single book - is better described in plural form as it is in the Church of England formularies. There it is called, 'The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament.' Christians do believe in an underlying unity in God's dealing with the world as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. But that work of God comes to us in a rich variety of written forms: poems, songs, histories, laws, Gospels and letters.

When we sit down to read and pray using these Holy Scriptures, we believe in faith that their written words enable us to communicate with the one Word that really matters – Jesus Christ, God's Word. What should we do then when we open this book for that purpose?

That is where this Collect is so useful. Though he was never himself a monk Cranmer summarised in this prayer the monastic way of praying. The England in which he lived was steeped in the thousand-year-culture of monastic spirituality – both Benedictine and Cistercian.

The monks had developed a method for reading the Holy Scriptures prayerfully, which they called *lectio divina* – ‘divine reading.’ It was a tried and tested method and is still practised today in monasteries. Indeed, it underwent a revival in the 20th century and is now practiced by Christians of many denominations. Cranmer’s Collect offers us a perfect summary of *lectio divina*.

Let’s consider its constituent parts. First, he establishes why we should be reading these books at all. It is because God has caused ‘all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning.’ That learning is the most important of all – learning about God and what he has done for us. Then, says Cranmer, we should ‘read, mark, learn and inwardly digest’ the words of Holy Scripture.

The first step is simply reading. This is not study or reading to fill our head with facts. It is something deeper: listening, through the words of Scripture, for the only voice that meets our deepest desire – God’s voice. For that kind of prayerful reading monastic practice has always advised choosing brief excerpts, a few lines of a psalm or a parable.

If you can find spiritual nourishment reading the biblical passages about people being massacred in a battle or how to chop up a bull for sacrifice, good for you! But most of us struggle with that. Short excerpts from the Psalms and Gospels have always been viewed as the most privileged places of encounter with Christ.

Then says Cranmer, ‘Mark!’, in other words stop. In this kind of reading, being stopped in our tracks happens often. It is the opposite of modern ‘speed-reading.’ Suddenly, a phrase or a word on the page will jump out at us. It might be a consoling word, but it might also be a challenging one – calling us to change our life. God’s living Word, Jesus Christ, uses these written words not only to comfort us but sometimes to give us a poke in the ribs as well. Either way, when that occurs, we should mark the relevant passage.

Then says Cranmer, 'Learn!' In relation to God, we are all pupils because Jesus taught is our only master. In this kind of reading, we learn about who God is and what God wants – not just generally - but in relation to my life. That is not about getting yet more information. It is about formation – letting God gradually shape my life through the wisdom of his word.

Then, says Cranmer, 'Inwardly digest.' Food is a powerful biblical image. Monks often kept farms and worked with ruminants - cows and sheep. Watching them slowly chewing the cud, many monks compared that to what we do in mulling over a verse from the Scriptures.

We chew it with our mouth, swallow it into the 'stomach' of the heart, regurgitate it, and chew it again and again, until we have extracted all its richness. Scripture says that God's Word is sweeter than honey. The hidden food is Jesus the Bread of Life. In this ruminative reading, we gradually allow him to fill us with his wisdom. He is that Living Bread in whom all the hungers of the human heart are met - and ended. Actually, that kind of chewing over the word is the original meaning of the word 'meditation.'

At the end of the Collect, Cranmer exhorts us to practice patience. That is an important virtue, more than ever needed in our increasingly impatient fast-food culture. Jesus the Bread of Life does not offer us fast food. Instead, he calls us to the slow work of spiritual nourishment, of patient discipleship, reading and chewing over the Scriptures, listening to God's Word in prayer. The promised end offered by God is more wonderful than any 'quick fix.' As Cranmer says it is, 'The blessed hope of everlasting life.'

So, if we want to pray using Scripture there is no better guide than this little prayer. Its four steps – 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' - drawn from monastic tradition and so ably summarised by Cranmer teach us how to engage with God in his word.

Let me return however to the sad fact that the same Archbishop Cranmer who gave us this splendid prayer culled from the monastic tradition as well as the other literary splendours of The Book of Common Prayer also contributed to the destruction of one of the greatest monastic traditions in Europe. History calls it 'the dissolution of the monasteries.'

The 16th century was a violent and turbulent time, here and abroad, and Cranmer also suffered a violent death. But perhaps in God's strange way of working, his way of bringing good out of evil, those monasteries did not dissolve merely into nothingness, into 'bare ruined choirs.'

Perhaps, like an aspirin dissolving into water, they dissolved into the wider Church of England – giving us its love for the Daily Offices of Matins and Evensong and its reverence for Holy Scripture not only read but prayed as well.

Perhaps this Collect, which so perfectly summarised the monastic way of prayer, may keep the essential monastic spirit – the desire for God - alive at the heart of Anglican spirituality.

Let us at least hope so - and strive to make it so in our own lives.