

“Collect”

Sunday, November 14, 2010

The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector

During the 2004 presidential primaries I lived in New Hampshire. One of the Democratic candidates – and New England’s favorite son at the time – was Howard Dean, a former governor of Vermont. During one particular interview Dean was asked to name his favorite book in the New Testament. The hapless Dean hemmed and hawed and finally blurted out, “Job!” A book located for centuries in the heart of the . . . Old Testament.

Well, if I ever had had any inkling to vote for Dean it evaporated in that moment. I believe that everyone should be functionally literate in the Bible if for no other reason than so much of our western culture, from linguistics to values and ethics, is rooted in the scriptures of the Jewish and Christian people. Knowledge of the Bible is foundational to a well-rounded education.

So the bad news for Howard Dean is that he lost me as a potential voter with his poor knowledge of the Bible and on such a simple question. The good news is that I have been on a mission to eradicate Biblical illiteracy ever since.

In September a Pew research poll was released that measured religious knowledge in America. This was a smart thing to do on Pew’s part. Religion, whether you are for it or against it, is a major influence in our society and the world. People talk about religion all the time. It is a hot topic and the lead story more often than not in the news: A proposed mosque in lower Manhattan; a doctor who performed abortions, murdered in Kansas; a President who is a Christian but who many believe is a closet Muslim; a church that wanted to build a community garden in Shaker Heights; Israeli construction of Jewish settlers homes in Muslim Arab East Jerusalem; a brain dead Roman Catholic woman on a ventilator in Florida; a Pope who sets up a process to poach dissident Anglicans for his own Church; an openly gay, in relationship Bishop whose consecration rocked the foundations of the Anglican Communion; teaching of Creationism versus Evolution versus Intelligent Design in our schools. Religion is a hot topic and there is no dearth of opinions about it.

With all this focus on religion and the Bible you would think that people would know of what they speak. That they would be familiar with the Bible and those passages that support their beliefs. That people would be conversant on the various theologies and doctrines of the particular faiths and denominations that they adhere to. But sadly they get failing grades on all these topics.

Many American high school seniors believe that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. A majority of Americans cannot name one of the four Gospels. Jay Leno asked his audience one night to name one of Jesus’ twelve apostles; they came up empty. One in ten Americans believes that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife, and only one-third knows that Jesus (not Billy Graham) preached the Sermon on the Mount. One of the most frequently quoted passages from the Bible—“God helps those who help themselves”—actually appears nowhere in either the Hebrew or the Christian Testament: which is really good news considering that the saying is really lousy theology.

Amazingly the Pew poll showed that atheists and agnostics are more knowledgeable about the Bible and religion than any group of Christians or Jews! Atheists and agnostics average score on the poll was 20.9 questions correctly answered out of 32 asked. Jews averaged 20.5. White Mainline Protestants, into which we Episcopalians get lumped, even though we are not Protestants, was 15.8, or less than half.

My friends this is a pathetic commentary, especially for those of us in the Church. It reflects poorly on the parish priest who by his or her vows is, “called to work as a pastor, priest, and teacher.” It reflects poorly on Christian educators who are given the specific task of providing educational opportunities for the youngest to the oldest of us. It reflects poorly on lay leaders who work hard to provide high quality education in the Church. But most of all it reflects poorly on the people in the pews who seem to believe that knowledge of the Bible and their faith are not very important to their spiritual health and well-being. Nothing could be further from the truth.

This morning in our opening collect we prayed, “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.”

Powerful words -- do we believe them?

A key doctrine in Anglicanism is *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, or the law of prayer is the law of belief. Simply put it means what we pray is what we believe. Is what we prayed in this collect this morning part of your belief system? Do you believe that you personally, “hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Holy Scriptures” so that you may ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life?

The Pew poll would tell us no, very few of us do. The response of the congregation at Christ Church to the diverse education programs that we offer at this parish would back up Pew’s research, not the collect.

Consider these facts: our Wednesday morning Bible study averages three people attending, despite it being a lively, engaging and fun place to discuss and learn about scripture. No one new joined our Education for Ministry class this year, despite our having an excellent class and team of facilitators. The catechesis of the Good Shepherd program – the best Christian education program for kids available anywhere – struggles to get many of the parents to consistently bring their children to the program. It’s not the children who are resistant; they love the atriiums and their teachers, it’s the parents. If these kids could drive they would be here. Our Lenten adult program struggles to get a dozen people who will give up five Wednesdays to grow in their faith during this holy season. Even a distinguished Biblical scholar like John Spencer only drew an average of fifteen people per week for the outstanding lecture series on the Synoptic Gospels we just completed. What this indicates is that only a small fraction of the congregation avail themselves of Christian formation in this place.

In this month’s New Hampshire Episcopal News, Bishop Gene Robinson wrote about evangelism. He stated, “What really scares us about evangelism is that we fear it might expose the weakness of our faith, to our embarrassment. Someone might discover that we don’t know enough about our faith.” Bishop Gene is right. And what he says exposes another hard issue. Lack of knowledge about our faith also prevents us from spreading the good news to others because we are embarrassed. As well we should be.

While I believe that most Episcopalians love this wonderful Church of ours, they just don’t know much about it, the Christian faith or the scripture that it is rooted in despite a cornucopia of opportunities to learn about it.

Well, the good news is we can stop worrying about being discovered as deficient in our knowledge my friends. What Pew has done is reveal that the emperor has no cloths! The whole world now knows how religiously illiterate we are.

Let’s change that. Let’s put on the clothes of knowledge. Let’s make the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel become our truth. When the opportunity to testify about our faith comes along, let God through Christian formation “give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.” (Luke 21:15) Let God give them to you through reading, study and learning.

Start by taking the Bible and Book of Common Prayer quizzes that are in your bulletin. (BTW the answers will be given to you as you leave today.) But take the test first to gauge your knowledge. Then make a resolution – regardless of your score - to learn more about the Bible, the BCP and your faith.

Compel me to add new Bible Study sessions because the demand is so great. Take the plunge and lead a Bible study class yourself; I’ll train you to do this. Make me beg Fr. Jim and the Rev. Melanie to teach and facilitate new adult education programs because of our spiritual hunger. Fill Leslie’s atriiums so that she needs to find new teachers. Hey, become a teacher yourself. The best way to learn something is to share it. But be careful, our children in the Good Shepherd program are smart as whips. Most of the older ones would score well on these quizzes. Let’s add another full EFM class in September of 2011. Let’s get the Adult Forum’s filled with adults eager to learn. Make a decision that no matter what happens, this Lent you are going to participate in our Lenten program. Use our excellent library. Lobby the Vestry to double fund all our educational programs in 2011.

Let's we Christ Churcher's be people who hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest our holy scriptures and the tenants of our Episcopal expression of the Christian faith. In so doing we will truly grasp the blessed hope of everlasting life. That's not a bad pay-off. And who knows, maybe next time Pew surveys America, we can top the atheists! Now wouldn't that be sweet?

So today let's commit to really hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest knowledge about our faith. It will make a significant improvement in the quality of your life. And hey, you never know when there's going to be a quiz. Be prepared.

Amen.