



CHRIST CHURCH

1415 Pelhamdale Avenue
Pelham, New York 10803

Telephone (914) 738-5515
Facsimile (914) 712-0526

The Rev. Matthew Hoxsie Mead
Rector

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Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to bear 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.

Collect of the Day for Proper 28

Dear Friends in Christ,

We are in the middle of the winter. Christmas is over, and Lent is still a ways off. The Super Bowl is also over, and March Madness is still a month away. What to do? Reading a few books is always worthwhile. In this Chronicle I want to offer a few thoughts on books, libraries, and the Bible.

TWO LIBRARIES & SOME GOOD CHRISTIAN READS

Our Parish Library has been getting a long-overdue cleaning and sorting of books. Melissa Roddy has spent numerous hours working with her son Will and with Sarah Weeks and Michael Moynihan going one shelf at a time, book-by-book, and reorganizing everything. This week they began adding larger labels to make it easier to find books. Many thanks to Melissa and her team. This work has really done wonders to showcase the resources in our Library. I encourage you to stop by, and see the work they have done.

There is a table of books for sale (cheap) just outside the Library. These books are from two sources. Many are duplicates from the Parish Library that don't need second copies in house. Others are cast offs from my personal library. There are plenty of good books on the table. Feel free to browse these books and make a small donation in the glass jar to the Rector's Discretionary Fund.

If you are in New York City at some point between now and mid-May, you might consider stopping by the Morgan Library and Museum to see the “Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth” exhibit. The exhibit is described as follows:

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” With these words the Oxford professor J.R.R. Tolkien ignited a fervid spark in generations of readers. From the children’s classic *The Hobbit* to the epic *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien’s adventurous tales of hobbits and elves, dwarves and wizards have introduced millions to the rich history of Middle-earth. Going beyond literature, Tolkien’s Middle-earth is a world complete with its own languages and histories. Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth celebrates the man and his creation. The exhibition will be the most extensive public display of original Tolkien material for several generations. Drawn from the collections of the Tolkien Archive at the Bodleian Library (Oxford), Marquette University Libraries (Milwaukee), the Morgan, and private lenders, the exhibition will include family photographs and memorabilia, Tolkien’s original illustrations, maps, draft manuscripts, and designs related to *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*.

I’ve been a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien’s work for most of my life. As you probably know, there was a series of excellent movies made last decade bringing *Lord of the Rings* to the big screen. The movies are great, but the books are far better. If you are a Tolkien fan already, swing by the Morgan Library to see the exhibit. If you have never read any of his books, start with *The Hobbit*. It is a wonderful adventure full of great characters, and it opens the door to the fantastic world of Middle-earth.

One of my favorite authors is C.S. Lewis who was friends with Tolkien. Lewis’ most famous books are the *Chronicles of Narnia*, a seven-part series of novels written for younger readers that offers wonderful allegories of basic Christian theology. I highly recommend the *Chronicles of Narnia* – for adults and children – they are quick reads with lots of substance.

Lewis wrote another, lesser known series of novels called the *Space Trilogy*. These three books are written more for adults than younger readers, and the material gets more dense as each book progresses. The Narnia books offer Christian allegory through the fantasy genre. The *Space Trilogy* examines basic theology and ethics through a Christian lens via the science fiction genre. I highly recommend the *Space Trilogy* – start with *Out of the Silent Planet*.

Over the last year I’ve read or reread some of the classic dystopian novels of the 20th century: George Orwell’s *1984*, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, and Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*. All three are good reads and the sort of thing that most of us were assigned – and maybe even read – in high school. Next on my own reading list is *The Plague* by Albert Camus. Dystopian literature and television have become very popular again in the last decade or so as the worry about climate change, unchecked government, global spread of disease, etc. has increased. Perhaps not the most uplifting topics, but always ones that encourage conversation and occasionally even some thinking around ethics.

A BIT ABOUT BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Two weeks ago I walked into my office and discovered two copies of the Common English Bible on my desk. They were gifts from Canon Susan after an enjoyable conversation around Bible translations at our most recent Clericus gathering. I have not yet explored this new translation of the Bible, but I have heard good things about it. These will go alongside the numerous other translations that I refer regularly to.

The next most recent translation of the Bible I acquired was *The New Testament: A Translation* by David Bentley Hart. Unlike most published translations which are the products of large committees made up of dozens of scholars, Hart did his alone. His translation is insightful because he does not clean up, via translation into elegant prose, Greek that is occasionally sloppy, disjointed, or rudimentary.

I think these two new translations illustrate two things: 1) no translation of the Bible is perfect, and 2) new translations are necessary because scholastic work and discovery does not end and English idiom and vocabulary continue to evolve.

At some point, every Christian makes the realization that the Bibles we read are translations. The Bible was originally written in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament and the Apocrypha). Since before there was a New Testament, the Scriptures have been translated into the vernacular language of given regions. For example, a very famous Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures known as the Septuagint (LXX) dates from approximately 300 BC.

There isn't one, single, ancient Hebrew or Greek Bible out there that is the one source that all Bibles are translated from. The introduction from David Bentley Hart's new translation offers a clear description of this reality and what it has meant through the centuries:

There is no single definitive text of the New Testament canon. Among the oldest manuscripts we have, no text in the New Testament, nor any complete collection of New Testament texts, wholly agrees with every other version. Among the oldest renditions of its various books there are numerous differences, mostly quite small, but occasionally quite significant. This presents a problem for the literalist believer in "verbal inspiration"; for, if indeed an absolutely *pure* text of scripture somewhere exists, we have no notion whatsoever where it is to be found. That sort of textual fundamentalism, however, is very much a late modern phenomenon; during the first several centuries of the church, it was widely known that there was a great variety of differing versions of biblical texts, and this seemed to perturb no one very much. – *The New Testament: A Translation* by David Bentley Hart, pg. xxxiii.

There are many, many (mostly incomplete) manuscripts of individual Biblical books in the original languages. There are also ancient translations and bits of text in other languages

(Latin, Syriac, etc.) that sometimes predate extant copies made in the original languages. The Scriptures were often written on scrolls and copied, by hand, when a new copy was needed. Scribal errors and sometimes even additions or subtractions were incorporated into these copies over time. The result is a massive amount of copies that are nearly identical, but none are exactly identical. Translators (modern and ancient) had to find the most trustworthy sources to translate from. For that reason, it is actually very helpful to go back to some of the earliest translations of the text, because they often preserve early forms that “original language” texts might not. For example, a Latin manuscript translating Genesis from 400 AD might inform us that certain errors crept over the centuries into a Hebrew manuscript dating from 1000 AD.

Academic versions, called “Critical Versions”, of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament include complex and detailed notations indicating every decision that needed to be made when manuscripts were not in agreement over a certain word, phrase, or verse. There are several important “Critical Versions” in publication, and they are generally the basis for every new translation that comes out. Critical Versions are updated regularly, and sometimes – as when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered – there is important “new” information to consider. English translations need to be updated or newly commissioned to incorporate this knowledge as well as to incorporate changes and evolutions in English idiom and vocabulary.

There are many excellent English translations, but none are perfect. Every English-speaking Christian eventually settles on his or her favorites. Below are some of the best and most well-known English Translations.

The King James or Authorized Version (KJV) – This is the classic English language Bible known throughout the world. All in all, it is an excellent translation, though it reflects scholastic decisions that are now several centuries old. Unless you are familiar with the style and the vocabulary, it can be very difficult to read.

The Revised Standard Version (RSV) – This is the 1960s update of the KJV to more modern English. It is meant to be a revised version of the KJV so wherever possible the decisions made for the KJV were kept – unless there were strong scholarly reasons for changing the meaning of a word or translating a sentence differently the editors followed the KJV.

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) – This is the late 1980s “update” of the RSV. It was done by many of the same people who did the RSV, but it is not meant to be a revised version of either the KJV or the RSV. It was a new translation from start to finish in the spirit of the RSV. The editors often replaced exact translations with implied meanings. For example, “Son of Man” in the Old Testament is never translated directly as “Son of Man”, but rather “mortal” or “one like a human being”. This removes the Old Testament context of the term when it is used by Jesus in the New Testament. The NRSV does place the literal translation in the notes. We read the NRSV in worship at Christ Church, and this is the translation that I give to our Confirmation Class members.

New International Version (NIV) – The NIV is a very colloquial English translation. It’s a very good translation and easy to understand. It is used by many Evangelicals.

New Jerusalem – A Roman Catholic translation that followed the decisions made in an earlier French translations of the Bible.

New American Standard Bible (NASB) – A wooden and very literal translation.

New American Bible (NAB) – Another Roman Catholic translation. This one, like the NIV is very colloquial.

Common English Bible (CEB) – This is a newer translation published in 2011 that was sponsored by an alliance of several denominational publishers in the United States including Church Publishing Inc (Episcopal Church). According to the CEB's preface, the motivation for producing a new translation was that “it has proved difficult to combine concern for accuracy and accessibility in one translation that the typical reader or worshipper would be able to understand.” One hundred twenty scholars from twenty-four different denominations worked on the translation.

If you are looking to buy a Bible, pick a few favorite passages and see how different Bibles translate them. Once you choose a translation, you need to make sure that your Bible includes two essential things. The first is the Apocrypha, a collection of books that are not in the Jewish canon of the Old Testament, but are in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches’ canon and also were considered part of every Christian canon before the Protestant Reformation. Second, make sure your Bible is be a “Study Bible”. A Study Bible includes detailed notes and background information about each book and every verse. This information is really important if you want to understand the text.

Sometimes people ask me... which book of the Bible should I read first? Start with Saint Luke’s Gospel. We are reading Luke in church this year, and it is helpful to know the larger context.

Whatever you read this winter, I encourage you to share what you have read with others. Have a warm and blessed winter and happy reading!

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew Hoxsie Mead". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

The Reverend Matthew Hoxsie Mead, Rector