

A Time to Give Thanks

It seems like every year, Thanksgiving celebrations stray further from its original intent. In some ways, Thanksgiving has gotten squeezed out by Halloween and the Christmas holidays. It has become a holiday of the National Football League. When people are asked what Thanksgiving Day means to them, most of the answers revolve around eating lots of food and watching football. Family dinners are planned around the football games, either timed to coincide with halftime or else during the game which has little interest with the family. If there is a moment of reflection and giving of thanks, it is usually brief and rather personal.

Thanksgiving is the holiday that probably has the most confusion whether it is a national holiday or a religious festival. It is the one holiday on the national calendar which clearly has many elements of both national and religious origins. While the origins and actual events of that first Thanksgiving have been whitewashed and glossed over, we would do well to remember what brought those early immigrants to this country and why they were giving thanks. Religiously speaking, a celebration of giving thanks follows in the footsteps of other religions which had and have celebrations of giving thanks. Jewish teachings included celebrations of giving thanks to God for either specific things such as delivery out of slavery in Egypt with Passover or with the festival of Pentecost which gave thanks for the first harvest in the spring. The purpose behind all these celebrations is the belief that the source of the blessings that are being enjoyed is ultimately God. Those early immigrants were giving thanks to God for providing from the land to which they came and the help from the indigenous people in securing a good harvest for the upcoming winter. The other thing we need to remember of this first Thanksgiving is that it was a community celebration, a

community meal. Everyone enjoyed the feast, it did not matter how much or what one contributed to the harvest, they all enjoyed the feast equally.

Considering the religious aspect of this holiday, let us now consider the Gospel reading from John. This reading occurs just after Jesus fed the crowds of people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Jesus had then avoided the crowd because of what they were then expecting of Him. This attitude of the crowds can be summed up with this story:

Two old friends bumped into one another on the street one day. One of them looked forlorn, almost on the verge of tears. His friend asked, "What has the world done to you, my old friend?" The sad fellow said, "Let me tell you. Three weeks ago, an uncle died and left me forty thousand dollars." "That's a lot of money." "But, two weeks ago, a cousin I never knew died and left me eighty-five thousand free and clear." "Sounds like you've been blessed..." "You don't understand!" he interrupted. "Last week my great-aunt passed away. I inherited almost a quarter of a million." Now the other man was really confused. "Then why do you look so glum?" "This week...nothing!"

This is what happens sometimes when we receive gifts, especially free and unexpected gifts. We get used to getting them and may even reach a point where we expect those gifts, we feel entitled to them. This was the attitude of the crowd in the Gospel reading. They had just been miraculously fed by Jesus. But they wanted more; they wanted more proof from Jesus of who He is. They did not want the gift that Jesus was offering; they were looking for the physical gift of food, food for their bodies. Jesus reminds them that the gift He gives is much more, much greater than physical food. One thing that we need to remember is that all that we have, both physical and spiritual gifts come from God. That is what we are doing this evening, gathering to remember with purpose those blessings

which we have been so freely and unexpectedly given and the sources of those blessings. Among these gifts that we have been given, but not the least of which, is to be living in this country and all the opportunities we have. By most any measure, we are richly blessed compared to the rest of the world. For all this, we are thankful.

Some churches will decorate their altar on Thanksgiving with two cornucopias. One will be full, representing all the many plentiful blessings for which we have been given and enjoy. The empty cornucopia is a reminder that not every has such blessings. Some people are lonely; some people do not have the basic needs that everyone should have; some people are abused or taken advantage of, those who would be like the ones that Jesus noticed and cared for; some do not have the same opportunities that we have had; some have not benefited from the 'accident of birth' and live in a country that is oppressive. These are the people whom are represented by the empty cornucopia and whom we remember on this day of plenty. It would be analogous to the Jewish Seder meal which includes a part where those Egyptians who lost their lives in the Red Sea were remembered and prayed for.

There are many other blessings for which we can be thankful. On a national scale, we can be thankful that despite what the media experts had predicted, what different groups had said about the elections, and to an extent who spent the most amount of money, we do have a system that allows the citizens to exercise their right to vote without threats of violence or coercion. We can be thankful for the peaceful transition of authority in the government. While our country is not perfect and we will not always get what we want, we can be thankful that we do have the opportunity to improve the country so that all citizens can enjoy the same rights and freedoms as every citizen.

We need to remember that regardless of the blessings we have and enjoy, all of them have been gifted to us by God. We also need to remember that we do live in community with each other, a community that has been brought together by numerous factors. It is by facing the future together, as a community deciding what is best for the community that we can leave a legacy for those generations who come after us. Just as the first Pilgrims modeled their understanding of Christianity by incorporating that model into their community life and passing it on to future generations, so do we have that blessing. A blessing that acknowledges the past, looks toward the future and tries to make things better for today.

My prayer for us this Thanksgiving season is that we see each day with new eyes, eyes that let us see how God graces our lives in so many ways and may we see how we need to give our thanks to God for all these blessings, not just once a year around a turkey dinner, but every day. Happy Thanksgiving!