

“True Thanksgiving”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

Does it annoy God when we give thanks? I’m being serious here. Does it annoy God when we give thanks? When I ask this question, most people look incredulous. After all, we gather on this Thanksgiving Sunday and tell one another that we ought to thank God for our blessings. One of the problems with the world and with today’s society, we tell ourselves is that people aren’t thankful for what they have.

Yet, Jesus doesn’t say much about any moral obligation to give thanks. Yes, there’s the reliable story about the ten lepers, today’s gospel reading, but even this story is not about giving thanks so much as it is about the old rivalry between the people of Judea and Samaria. Look through the Gospels and you will certainly read about Jesus giving thanks when he breaks bread with others, but there are no obligations about our obligation to feel thankful.

The only other significant story about giving thanks from the Gospels is the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector as told in Luke. The tax collector, extortionist and traitor that he is, weeps and grovels, calling out, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” Meanwhile the religious pillar of the community stands apart and piously prays to God, “Lord, thank you that I am not like other people, especially like this tax collector over here.”

Ouch! Do our thanksgivings sound as pompous as these in God’s ears? I sat through an ecumenical Thanksgiving service, in my first parish, and what bothered me is that we seemed to gather to congratulate ourselves on being religious. “The world,” we said, “isn’t thankful enough. We ought to be thankful. We should thank God.” We went on to talk about oughts and should and how the world can be divided into two kinds of people, the grateful and the ungrateful. Then we thanked God for the blessings of prosperity, for living in a free country, for God’s favour – and for not being like others who are less prosperous, enslaved or ill-favoured. Thankfulness can become the most insidious kind of pride. How does this kind of thanksgiving sound to God?

Look at the language of Deuteronomy, today’s first reading, uses to describe the promised land: a land with springs and underground waters bursting forth from valleys and hills, wholesome wheat and barley, juicy grapes, sweet figs and tart pomegranates, olives and honey. And there are material resources too: iron, copper, raw materials for industry and trade. God describes fertile herds producing wool, meat, and milk, and anticipates that people will build “fine houses” and not be hungry. The scripture overflows with good stuff, piling on one blessing after another.

But gratitude comes from being aware not only of blessings but also of the alternative. It didn’t have to be this way. Deuteronomy describes the opposite as well: “a great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions,” and a life of slavery. In other words, blessings are temporal. There is a past in which we struggled for survival. There may be a future in which we struggle again. There are many who struggle even now in real or virtual wastelands, where real or metaphysical poisonous snakes, and scorpions prey on them and where they dream of the tastes of grapes, figs, and pomegranates.

That’s the stock point of giving thanks, isn’t it? It forces us to recognize disparity. We thank God for the food we eat because we know it doesn’t have to be on our plate at all. We thank God for wealth because we know there are people out there without wealth. Later in Deuteronomy God will order the chosen people to “open their hand to the poor and needy neighbour.” The sheer abundance of the land the author describes means that this wealth is to be shared, not hoarded.

“Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God,” says the author, “by failing to keep his commandments.” “Do not say to yourself, “my power and the might of my own hand have gained me wealth.” While entrepreneurial people with a strong work ethic and persistence can turn their wealth into greater wealth, nobody on earth is self-made or so I believe. I knew one proud farmer, from my first parish, who started his life with little more than two work horses and a stretch of ground. He plowed the fields, endured drought and floods, and arrived at the sunset of his life sipping lemonade on the covered porch he had built with his own hands. There is little that can describe the pleasure of resting and appreciating something you have made.

Yet his hard work alone did not earn him prosperity. Farmers in Bolivia work just as hard yet do not have the roads to transport their produce to market. Public roads and schools, adequate medical care, and opportunities for success allow some people to thrive. Yet this farmer I knew felt that people who were poor simply hadn’t worked hard enough.

Many of us, to some extent, feel the same. We become possessive of these “blessing” God has given us. We come to feel that what we have is ours by right. We give thanks to God as a way of laying claim to things that are “ours.” At Thanksgiving, we need to guard against becoming Pharisees, thanking God for our property, our prosperity and our freedom. For in reality we are tax collectors, what we own and enjoy did not come from our own hands and we will not take it with us.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. What am I trying to say? True thanksgiving is not a warm and fuzzy feeling of appreciation for our houses and cars and prosperity. True-thanksgiving is the feeling of a narrowly missed accident, a sin forgiven. It is the “Whew!” blown out of a throat that has been cooled by a long drink of water on a hot day. True thanksgiving is letting our eyes linger on the wasteland a little while longer, so that we don’t forget it or those of us who struggle through it. True thanksgiving is honouring the God who brings us safely through all that comes our way in life, the good, the bad, and the between. AMEN.