

18 November

Sunday before Thanksgiving Day

Throughout the Bible we are reminded of our great and wonderful privilege to give thanks to God. We see the patriarchs of Genesis building altars to make sacrifices for God's mercy. We see it throughout every book of the Old Testament. By word and example, we have a vibrant ancient tradition of expressing our gratitude. As we continue following Christ, it is who we are.

We find it again in all of St Paul's letters to the various early Christian churches. Rejoice, again I say rejoice. When he is enduring terribly hardships because of his evangelistic work, he is constantly remind us of his awareness that God is fully in control, and there is ample reason to express our thankfulness. And in the gospels, we see examples of Jesus praying to God, thanking the Father for all that He has given Him, and boldly proclaiming God's love.

As we continue on our spiritual safari we realized that we are truly blessed when we are able to focus our minds on what God has so abundantly given. To live in a perpetual attitude of gratitude is joy because we can see and acknowledge the handiwork created by God, and what is still being created around us.

It comes as absolutely no surprise that after a long, difficult, and perilous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, when the Pilgrims arrived here, they knelt in prayerful gratitude that they had survived. Life itself was a blessing.

The origins of our national day of Thanksgiving came the following year. Even though half of the settlers had died since arriving, and even though the survivors faced tremendous uncertainty, they gave thanks, and included others by making a point of inviting some of the local Native Americans who had helped them through a rough winter and growing season, to join them in a community meal.

You and I have probably re-enacted the essence of that first thanksgiving day back during our elementary school days, or in Sunday school. It was a very simplistic approximation of how we thought it was observed, probably far from realistic, but it gave us the introduction to something very significant and important: Thanksgiving and all that it means to us as individuals.

But from the 1620s until 1863, there was no designated national day of thanksgiving. It was observed in various parts of the country, and at various times of the year. In small communities along the frontier, the pioneer farmers would bring the harvest into the barns, and then join together to return thanks to the Lord. It was a very natural response, for they understood it was God who provided the rich soil, the sun and rain, and the abundance.

Then, in 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln proclaimed a national day of thanksgiving. It wasn't well received. How could people give thanks at a time when the country was torn apart, and when

every community had been touched by the tragedy of men killed in action, wounded, missing, or captured? To observe a day of thanksgiving when things were so bad just didn't seem appropriate.

Lincoln was right. Yes, conditions were terrible, there was death and destruction, the problems were great, but God's love and care for people was far greater. God has not deserted us. We are not alone.

Fast forward exactly a century to this date. Those of us who were alive on November 22nd, 1963, probably remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when we heard the news from Dallas the President Kennedy had been assassinated. Over the next days, the news got worse, and it was a frightening uncertain time.

The Cold War was a very real threat. We remember duck and cover drills. There were air raid shelters, and those two red lines on our radio - nationwide emergency broadcasting stations. We had air raid drills. There was a growing battle in some little out of the way country called Viet Nam. It was hard to find because some maps still called it French Indo China. The new President, Lyndon Johnson, was an uncertain factor and we didn't know what to expect. There was civil unrest at home - discrimination and bigotry, racial tension, and sometimes violence. The economy was unstable and the future uncertain, and a few months later it would collapse in the most serious recession since the Great Depression thirty years ago.

How in the world could anyone eagerly celebrate Thanksgiving at a time like this? We didn't have much of an appetite for it. Our minds were fixed on our worries that included fears of the future. It was almost as if we were waiting for the next proverbial shoe to drop. For so many reasons, a traditional Thanksgiving Day just didn't seem right.

Somehow, we didn't let the tradition collapse, and men and women of faith led younger boys and girls, as well as each other, into remembering that even with all the bad stuff that was happening in the world, God is still present. We are not alone. Even in our fears, in our lack of faith in God's care, God remains faithfully loving us. But, a relationship with God means that even when we are frightened or in mourning, we give thanks to Him, if only because we know He is there.

We fast forward fifty-five years to today. The same fears and uncertainty cling to us like mould. Uncertainty about world peace, domestic peace, the economy. We seem to have made so little progress on resolving racism and bigotry. Considering the attack of synagogues and Jews, we have gone backward. Today there is far more gun related violence than half a century ago, and it will be in the back of our minds as we do our shopping for the holidays. Already our day of thanksgiving seems to be diminished by the constant prattle of Black Friday sales, and the encouragement to stand in long lines Thursday night, rather than being with family and friends. The country has a growing rift between the haves and the have-nots. The list goes on, and undoubtedly you could add to it with your personal disfavorites.

So, how do you and I celebrate this holiday? I don't mean with the menu or the location. Rather, how do we turn away from an over-whelming barrage of negativity to give thanks to God? When we read angry rants about injustice in the world and at home, when we read reports of suffering people at home and abroad, how do we give thanks to God?

How do we give thanks to God when our own life and future looks problematic, uncertain, perhaps even very bleak?

I think we reach back to when we were children, and we were encouraged to make a list of all of the things and people for which we were thankful. It wasn't easy to get started. Maybe it began with our parents or aunts and uncles. And yes, perhaps a little reluctantly we added our pesky siblings. Our pets, toys, clothes. All the good things we liked. But gradually we picked up speed as more ideas came to us - rain and sunshine, clouds, green grass, the smell of leaves, favourite foods, and so on.

Perhaps the best thing you can do this week - and this is your homework assignment, by the way: Make a point of asking people: Tell me something good. That might catch them by surprise at first because in our culture we seem almost pre-programmed to see something negative and want to talk about it, to complain, to share unhappiness.

To become a child again as we start finding reasons to be thankful is always a good place to begin, because Jesus said we don't get into the Kingdom of Heaven unless we approach it with a childlike sense of gratitude and love. And, trust - trust in God's presence in our life. We begin making our list - mental or written - counting our blessings one by one. We'll never get everything onto the list, and that's all right. The exercise alone is enough to refocus our thinking from fear to trust, from frustration at what we don't have and what others don't have to gratitude for what God has given us.

Let's get started right now. We're in God's house together as the family of God's people. For a few moments, I hope you will sit quietly, close your eyes if that helps you focus, and begin remembering all of the gifts and blessing from God. And then we'll stand as we affirm our faith in God who loves us more than we deserve, and gifts us more than we can desire.