

October 10, 2010

## **And For That We Give Thanks**

I'm sure, like me, you have heard this story before - in one way or another: Two men were walking through a field one day, when they spotted an enraged bull. Instantly, they darted toward the nearest fence. The storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent that they wouldn't make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other, "Put up a prayer, John. We're in for it!" John answered, "I can't. I've never made a public prayer in my life." "But you must!" implored his companion. "The bull is catching up to us." "All right," panted John, "I'll say the only prayer I know - the one my father used to repeat at the table: "O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful!" I hope you're not saying that - at least not in that way - as I begin my sermon on this Thanksgiving Sunday!

Later on today - or tomorrow - many of us will be joining Canadians across the country by sitting down with friends and family to a Thanksgiving feast. It is a tradition that finds a home in many cultures and countries. A few weeks ago, we shared with some of our Asian friends in the Lunar Festival - a celebration of harvest and thankfulness. And I'm sure that others of you also have roots with similar customs. In reality, Thanksgiving ceremonies go back to the beginning of time. And the earliest rituals deal with the gathering of the community to eat together and give thanks to the Creator.

The passage of scripture from Deuteronomy that Trish read for us this morning, gives instruction for the festival of the first fruits - an ancient Thanksgiving celebration still celebrated today by Jewish people around the world as 'Succoth' - the festival of Weeks. The book of Deuteronomy is constructed as a series of speeches given by Moses to the Israelites gathered on the east side of the Jordan river. They are ready to cross the river into the promised land. Today's passage - which comes near the end of the longest speech (*Chapt. 4 - 28*) anticipates a time when Israel has come into the land and settled there. The passage offers important insights for all of us into the nature of thanksgiving. It encourages us to look at the deeper meaning of the ritual we celebrate - first of all - by reminding us that everything we have comes from the hand of the Creator. That's a hard concept for many to grasp in this fast-paced, get-ahead society in which we live. Work hard, invest wisely - and you create your own happiness - seems to be the catch-phrase of the day.

In an article in yesterday's 'Vancouver Sun', Douglas Todd writes: "In the Pacific Northwest, which has the highest proportion of non-religious people in North America, Thanksgiving is not always simple for those who do not believe in a transcendent reality (God). How do almost 2 out of 5 British Columbians who say they have no religion, and especially the 16% who are atheists, approach a festive day that encourages humans to express a sense of thankfulness, particularly for life itself being a gift? ... Many of the new atheists, such as the famously feisty Richard Dawkins, have widely promoted the concept of the 'selfish gene' - which maintains all biological and human behaviour can be reduced to self-interest. In a universe constructed upon the selfish gene, there is no room for pure empathy or authentic human altruism, say such atheists. Why, then, offer thanks to anyone or anything, since nobody ever 'gives' without attaching selfish strings?" ... The author of the best-selling book 'Progress Paradox', Gregg Easterbrook, finds it disturbing that North Americans seem to take their 'blessings' for granted even while their lives are generally getting better in regards to obtaining food, shelter and other creature comforts. Easterbrook maintains many men and women today avoid expressing gratitude because they are obsessed with pretending they are self-reliant. With society teaching us to be self-made and independent, Easterbrook persuasively argues, many people are fooling themselves by rejecting that

we are all indebted to others. Turning to the religious debate, he adds, 'The decline of intellectual respect for faith seems another factor. Mainstream academics and intellectuals now look down on the idea of gratitude to God as a rote church doctrine or even a primitive superstition ... Other aspects of the modern milieu assume that the universe is just here - a product of soulless deterministic forces - and if mindless chemistry gave us life - why should anyone feel thankful for a meaningless molecular coincidence?'

The thought that came to mind as I read that article was that it promotes 2 responses: One is an attitude of self-absorption and self-centredness that is already prevalent in our society. There seems to be an inherent assumption among many - particularly in North America - that we are **entitled** - entitled to a high standard of living, entitled to happiness, entitled to healthcare, entitled to freedom etc. The other response follows closely on its heels .... If I am entitled to whatever I get - I must ensure that others don't try to take it away from me. And so, we see a vicious cycle of competition and hoarding - of power, status, and possessions. This was reflected for me in another article I found in yesterday's 'Vancouver Sun' called 'Costco's Shopping List For Armeggedon'. I quote: "Just in time for Thanksgiving dinner, Costco is selling everything you need for a feast - in the year 2040. It's called 'Shelf Reliance Thrive' - and it consists of 5,011 servings of freeze-dried or dehydrated white rice, winter wheat, green peas, diced onions, sweet corn, sliced apples, ripe raspberries, lima beans and elbow macaroni with a shelf life of thirty years - not to mention 30 litres of imitation bacon, beef and chicken. These are constructed out of something called 'Textured Vegetable Protein' - the taste and texture of which, Costco promises, 'is consistent with real meat.' This is advertised as being enough food to preserve one person against famine for a year, or to keep a family of four alive in its suburban home (or its Chevrolet Suburban) for 3 months - counting down the lima beans to doom. Price: \$799.99 US "Given all the madness out there," writes an approving customer on the Costco comments page, "for the price of insuring your car for a year, you can purchase a bit of catastrophe insurance for you and your family. Then, hopefully, you can forget about it for 20 years - because you never needed it."

Competition, hoarding and fear are modern responses to a need to protect what we assume is ours by right! It is a spirit of 'possessive individualism' - an attitude of 'I don't owe anything to anyone' - which is causing fewer people to volunteer, join communities, or emphasize responsibility to others.

In contrast - our scripture passage today reminds us that everything is ours as gift from God. And the only adequate response is not to pat ourselves on the back, or to try to protect and hoard what we have. It is to give thanks to the One who sustains and blesses us day by day. In verse 2 of our passage from Deuteronomy 26, Moses instructs the Hebrew people, standing on the threshold of the promised land, to make an offering of first fruits - the best of the first crop in their new land.

*"When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance .... you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground .... and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God." (26:2)*

This is an exercise of faith and trust. What if there isn't a second harvest? What if drought or flood or pestilence come along and destroy the crops? By giving an offering of first fruits, the Hebrew people are being asked to trust that as God has provided for them in the past - so will God continue to sustain them in the future. That's a good lesson for all of us to remember - particularly when we are going through difficulties or the way ahead seems unclear.

*"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor .... When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, we cried to the Lord - the God of our ancestors; and God heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression." (26: 6 & 7)*

Like the Hebrew people, all of us have stories in our past, or in the stories of our ancestors, which speak of God's provision - 'manna in the wilderness' - sustenance and support in times of difficulty or grief. To

remember our blessings with thanksgiving is to place our hand once more into the hand of God - trusting that the One who has been there in the past to guide and strengthen and sustain us - will continue to do so, each step of our journey.

But thanksgiving is not just a vertical exercise of faith between the Creator and ourselves. This passage of scripture from the book of Deuteronomy reminds us that thanksgiving also calls for an active response - a reaching out to those around us:

*“Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house.” (26:11)*

The blessings we receive from God are meant to be shared. A ‘vertical’ relationship with God in gratitude generates a ‘horizontal’ relationship within the community. Thanksgiving comes with responsibility. We are blessed in order to share our blessings with others in our midst.

To celebrate Thanksgiving is to be ‘counter-intuitive’ to the society around us. It is to acknowledge God as the Source of all blessing and not ourselves; it is to place our trust in God - even when the very foundations of our society are shaking; and it is to recognize our connectedness and responsibility to all of creation. Our lives are a gift from God to be unwrapped with gratitude one day at a time. This is our hope, our belief, our promise. And for that - we give thanks.