

THANKSGIVING

Philippians 4:10-20

My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Thanksgiving is not a church festival. You won't find it on calendars of the Church Year. Thanksgiving is a national holiday, a secular celebration. Yet as Christians, we gather for worship as this secular holiday approaches because we know that all thankfulness to God must properly be offered through Christ and that it is from God and through Christ that we receive every blessing.

Perhaps you remember the story of the first Thanksgiving. The pilgrims, English Protestants, who had come to America for religious freedom and a chance to found a new society, had found their journey here long and arduous, and their time in our land hadn't been much different. There were many obstacles in the way of the success of their endeavor. They were on a new continent, in unfamiliar territory, with a different climate and without all the foundations of a civilized nation they had taken for granted at home. There was no Meijer, no WalMart. There were no do-overs. It was a make-or-break venture, and often they'd seemed on the verge of breaking.

At this point, the pilgrims had been in America ten months. The first winter had been the worst. They'd arrived during that winter, and a number of their friends and family members didn't live to see spring. It was disheartening. It was a small miracle any of them had survived it. A large part of their success was due to the hospitality and the aid of a local Indian tribe, the Wampanoag. They taught the pilgrims how to grow indigenous crops in the area and helped them learn to hunt in the winter.

And so here the pilgrims were now, white Christian men from England, gathered with pagan Native American men, alive and thankful, marking their first successful harvest with a feast. What a story of endurance, of the brotherhood of mankind, and of the goodness of the Creator who provides our daily bread, who sends His rain upon the righteous and the wicked, as the psalmist reminds us, not because we deserve it, but because He loves us.

And that's what makes everything that follows more tragic, isn't it? Almost whole tribes of Native Americans were wiped out in the centuries to come, not always purposefully, but oftentimes through diseases brought unintentionally from Europe, to which they had no immunity. Yet there was plenty of war as well, and not only between white men and Indians. No, the new nation founded a century and a half after the pilgrims' arrival would eventually go to war with itself, brother slaying brother. There would be many reasons for the Civil War, but we'd be naïve to deny race was a factor. So much for the unity of mankind! And while we haven't had a Civil War since, such tales are hardly unheard of in our world today, from genocide in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, to persecution on account of one's faith in China and the Middle East.

Many people don't realize it, but Thanksgiving wasn't actually a national holiday until well into our nation's history. A few presidents had declared days of thanksgiving before Lincoln, but it was Abraham Lincoln, in the middle of some of the bloodiest days of the Civil War, some of the darkest days in our national existence, who proclaimed perhaps the most famous and influential Thanksgiving Day since the first one, to be held on the last Thursday of November, 1863, which became the first in a long line of celebrations on the last Thursday of the month of November to follow, all the way down to our day.

Think about that. Having been delivered from inestimable hardship, the pilgrims celebrated Thanksgiving. In the midst of the bitter battle and gore of one of the most brutal wars in human history, Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving. The pilgrims and Lincoln, however, were hardly the first to give thanks even in the face of perilous odds and the shadow of death.

Philippians is one of St. Paul's prison Epistles, together with Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians. St. Paul sat in prison, facing almost certain torture or death on account of his faith in Jesus, and yet he wrote this letter the Philippians in which he continually urges them to rejoice, he gives thanks to God, and talks again and again of the joy that is his in Christ, even in suffering and trial. In fact, "in Christ" is sort of a refrain in this book of the Bible. St. Paul was lost, hopeless, and condemned on his own. Yet in Christ he was saved, hopeful, and forever free.

And so, imprisoned, he writes to the Philippians and in the lesson before us and thanks them for their concern for him. And they had reason to be concerned. It didn't look good for St. Paul. It didn't seem he'd be with them long. But while he was the one with plenty to worry about, his concern was not for himself, but for the Philippians, as he reflected the love of Christ that had taken hold of him in Damascus and that he was convinced could take him out of any prison, yes perhaps through death, to life eternal with Christ.

St. Paul wrote:

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Some of us have had hard years, whether on account of our health, or our finances, our social situations, family strains, or other personal struggles. I doubt, however, any of us have had worse struggles than the pilgrims who'd buried so many of their loved ones that year, or than Abraham Lincoln, who'd watched thousands upon thousands die under his command in a war that at the time it appeared he might lose. And whatever our struggles have been, and I am not diminishing them in any way, I doubt that they would make St. Paul's seem small. Such times, hard times, my friends, are not times for ingratitude. No, our national history, and much more importantly, the history of the Church enshrined in Holy Writ, teaches us just the opposite. Are you in the valley of the shadow of death? Rejoice. God is with you. He is Immanuel. And as a Christian you are in Christ, and in Christ you can do all things, can find contentment in any and every circumstance.

Permit one more tale of suffering endured, of gratitude even in the midst of earthly want and sorrow. It is the story of another man embattled, a man mocked as a fool, beaten as a dog, fastened naked to a torturous tree as the least of men, as less than human. It is a story of a man by all accounts forsaken by His heavenly Father who with His dying breath nonetheless prayed "*Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit.*" It is the story of a man who turned that worst of all Fridays into "Good Friday," and followed it up with Easter Sunday, the most joyous festival of the Church Year. It is the story of Christ, your Christ, the Christ who is in you through faith and the Christ in whom you can endure all things, weather every storm, hope in every circumstance.

Tomorrow, if you are so blessed to be able to do so, as you gather under a roof that shelters you from the weather outside, and around a table that holds food well beyond your daily bread, and share sweet conversation with those you love, and even more, who love you as well, as you partake of and enjoy and I pray cherish so much more than we ever deserve to partake of and enjoy from our heavenly Father's hand, under which we have so often strained, against which we have so often rebelled, toward which we have so often shown ingratitude, which we have so often taken for granted, give thanks, my brothers and sisters in Christ, give thanks, not only to some generic God, but in Christ to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who preserves you in your daily life, redeems and prepares you for eternity, who strengthens and upholds you along the way. And when that day passes, let the next be a day of thanksgiving as well. Amen.