

Thanksgiving Day 2009

Matthew 6:25-33

Let's start by twisting the standard interpretation of this gospel. When talking about this gospel people frequently get out their index finger, shake it at all and sundry, and say something along the lines of, "You shouldn't be worrying about . . ." And then, somehow, the gospel assumes a judgmental stance. After all, most of us, whether we have faith or not, worry about the means of life, and I know all of you well enough to know that you do too. So do I.

But then, we hear this gospel and the finger of guilt comes out wagging. I'm not going to attack that directly, but indirectly. This approach is an example of one of the classic errors in biblical interpretation, one which turns the Bible into a weapon of domination and abuse. One of the more harmful things we can do with the Bible is see it as a book which answers our questions. We do have questions about how we should live. The Bible is supposed to be our religious guide, so it should answer such questions, right? Wrong! The Bible presents the story of the relationship of a people with God, an ancient people of different culture, belief system, moral standards, institutional structures, beliefs about the physical and spiritual universes. On the basis of this, they may have had some questions differing from ours! But in watching a whole community, for over a thousand years, struggle with its relationship with God we may find out a whole lot of important things about how to struggle with a relation with God. We may not find our specific questions answered, questions which those ancient people never asked, but our struggle with God has been shaped by their struggle and in knowing them we, eventually, know ourselves. Which also has its value, even if specific questions haven't been answered.

I would add that there is something a bit self-centered in thinking that answering the questions which float to the top of my brain is what God's revelation ought to spend its time doing. Maybe I'm not asking the right questions. Maybe I need a different take on things. Maybe my vision is a little constricted. There is a huge difference between answering my questions, and, if I may coin a horrible word, deconstricting my vision. After all, the questions I ask are based on the vision I have. An inadequate vision leads to an inadequate set of questions, which leads to a self-centered abuse of scripture.

Christianity is interested in enlarging and preserving a worthy vision of what it means to be human. The answers to specific questions are generally secondary to the preservation of the vision. Now, all this does have to do with Thanksgiving, just in case you're beginning to doubt it. The Christian vision, as reflected in today's lessons, is that human beings live most deeply out of gratefulness and not out of worry. That doesn't mean worry isn't a part of being human. All it means is that if that part of our humanity makes us who we are, fully and completely, then we are, in some way, lessened.

The particular part of the gospel lessons to which I'm referring is a bit sinister, so it goes unnoticed: God clothes the grass of the field. Right. But then the grass is burned in the furnace, even though God has clothed it. I've never heard anyone talk about that aspect of the lesson before, that everything God gives us to sustain life sustains a life which will die as the grass does. This matches human experience. Even though we're grateful for life and the means of life, we know we will die.

Comment: Don't we kill life a little each day?

Comment Two: But the grass is perennial.

The grass lives because it dies. A forest that doesn't die, doesn't live. There's no nutrient in the ground, there's nothing to sustain new life. In Christianity, a point central to our spiritual lives is recognizing the experience of death we have while we are alive and figuring out what to do with that experience. After all, we're constantly losing things that don't come back: relationships, experiences, abilities – we lose them and they are gone, present only in memory, if that. This also, by the way, is a lot of what death means. The pain of death is that we don't have visiting privileges in that realm. I lose someone to death and he/she doesn't come back, not into my current experience. Maybe later, but not now.

So, in being a Christian, the question comes, what do we do with the presence of death in our lives? It is a constant companion. What do we do with the fact that the grass, clothed by God, gets thrown into the furnace? What do we do with the fact that all our very honest, very real, very devout attempts to serve others and fulfil the kingdom of God somehow, eventually, come to nothing. Our institutions don't last forever, no matter what we put into them.

The Christian response to death is more in the nature of an assertion than an explanation.

Now, I'm going to get theological for a minute. Explanations distance you from things. To explain something is quite distinct from loving it. Explaining may help us care for things. It may improve the efficiency of our caring, but an explanation is not a sustained decision to care. Simply to be able to explain how the Christian life works is a far sight from actually caring enough to try to live it. I'm good at explanations. Explaining is, after all, my profession. But the actual living is as difficult for me as for anyone. Status as clergy doesn't help. Though I do, as I once told a Commission on Ministry, to their consternation, have a sense that God called me to be a priest because God was aware that I'd make a poor lay person. They weren't used to that justification, even though there's truth in it.

The Christian response to the presence of death is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the assertion that life continues, that we partake of it, and that it is life, not death, that makes us who we are. When we sit down to dinner today, the point to the feast is the celebration that it is life, not death that makes us who we are.

This ties us back to the first part of this talk. The ancient Israelites struggled to come to the conclusion that it was life, not death, that made them who they were. This is evident in some of the later prophets where Israel is accused of making a covenant with death, rather than with God. Making a covenant with someone or something is to allow the other to make you who you are. That's what marriage is about – marriage is a promise that you will be close enough to your spouse to allow them to make you who you are.

Comment: Yikes!

Well, I tell people this in premarital counseling and they look at me as if I'd come from the planet Zot. Now this statement requires a footnote. Sometimes people want to make

(manipulate) other people be certain things or behave in certain ways. And trying to remake someone according to a preset pattern, that's not part of a covenant. That's not part of what marriage, whether formally blessed by the church or not, is about. Marriage as a covenant requires listening, responding, changing, because the remaking must be mutual in order to be a remaking according to covenant. This mutuality of the covenant shows up in the Old Testament. God allows Israel to make him who he is. He acts out of love in response to the breaking of covenant, not out of law, the broken covenant shapes his response to his people. But it is clear that God responds to the brokenness with mercy, our brokenness provokes a response from God, he is made who he is by his covenant with his people.

Enough on that.

The key point is that the Christian life, the Christian response to the constant presence of death, is thanksgiving and the assertion that it is life, not death, that makes us who we are. To allow death to make us who we are is a constant temptation. Look at this society. How often do we appeal to violence and the threat of death in order to solve problems! I don't need to give you examples, you can think of them for yourself. But just one, because I heard it again recently and it always stupefies me. A gentleman made the claim that civilization would be advanced if every household had a hand gun. He was serious. Now that's about as clear an appeal to death and the power to impose it to make our society what it is as I can find.

The power to impose death will save us, that's the claim being made. To understand the power to impose death as saving us from death, that's a covenant with death. If one lives out of a covenant with death, death is what you get. Even if you manage to live in such a world, death is what you become when you appeal to its power. But if you live out of a covenant with life through giving thanks for it, then life is what you get. That is the point to this gospel. It's not that God's taking care of you will make everything in this life all right in either the short or the long run. All of us know that's not true. It's a religious pathology to believe that being devoted to God will give you an easy road. But it is not a pathology to believe that thanksgiving and a devotion to life serves as a foundation for living out of life, not death. That's the claim of the gospel and that's what, for a Christian, this feast we celebrate today is about.

Now, a final word. I was reminded before church that there are two relatively secular holidays in the church's calendar: Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. These are not major feasts. They are what, in the old days when we knew The Book of Common Prayer, were called Black Letter Feasts and opposed to Red Letter Feasts. Red Letter Feast's names had red capitals and they were the important ones: the apostles, feasts of the life of Jesus and the Holy Family, a few key folk (mostly from Scripture) such as John the Baptist. Black Letter feasts were everyone else. Both the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving were black letter feasts, which put them in their appropriate place. For a Christian, the resurrection of Jesus has to be more important than the Fourth of July. End of story.

Yet part of the Christian's concern, part of our matter for thanksgiving, is that we are part of this country. We do have the history we have. What we give thanks for is not the story of our country in and of itself. That story has within it great evil as well as great good and we cannot give thanks for great evil. We've been given this history to do something with it. It is the story

from which, for better or for worse, we will derive our lives. This story, in all its variegated values, is a gift. Given to us by people who didn't know they were giving it to us. Some of what's given is clearly good and some is terrifying. But they are all gifts to which we must relate, out of which we must act, from which we must grow. What we give thanks for is that the good can shape us and the bad is that which we are called to transform into something else. The whole story is gift, but gifts consist of things that need to be treated creatively, that need to be transformed, as much as of things which are simply good in and of themselves. We can give thanks for both kinds of gifts. It is, after all, not the vocation of a Christian to be a passive acceptor of good which someone else has created. It is the Christian vocation to take that which was once not good, and through our caring, to transform it into something worthy of the presence of God.

The fact that we have that vocation is, in and of itself, a matter of thanksgiving. That's all I have to say about that. Please stand for the creed.