

“For all sorts and
conditions of men”

Sermons on Thanksgiving Day probably ought to have something to say about giving thanks. But first, a reference to an interesting passage in the Hymn we just sang. (Hymnal 1982, #377 *All people that on earth do dwell*) There’s something in the first stanza one doesn’t expect from the 17th century: God is served by mirth. We usually think of God’s service as doing something for someone else (or even for him) and of mirth as private enjoyment. Yet I find mirth usually comes to me in community, and that my mirth is of service to others in making their joy possible. As their mirth makes my joy possible. So just a sidelight here – sometimes the church gets a bit too serious about itself and we don’t notice the service of God even when we’re doing it. It is a gift to a community to enable its joy. It is a gift to a community to support its members in the enjoyment of each other’s company. This is a part of the service of God and of a life of thanksgiving. That’s enough on mirth.

During Advent, which starts next Sunday, I’m going to give a series of talks on *Morning Prayer* instead of sermons. After the turn of the year we will be doing *Morning Prayer* one Sunday a month. And there is a prayer in that service which speaks quite precisely and clearly to this issue of thanksgiving. It’s on page 101 of the Book of Common Prayer, and is called *The General Thanksgiving*.

I think this prayer is one of the great prayers of the English language. The passage we’re after includes lines 7,8 and 9, which outline the foundational reasons for Christians to give thanks:

“ . . . but above all (we give thanks) for your immeasurable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ;
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory . . . ”

There we have the very foundation for thanks giving. All this business about gathering in the harvest is very well; it is a reason for giving thanks. But if you want to get to the meat of the matter, of reasons to give thanks, they are: for the redemption of the world by Christ, for the means of grace and for the hope of glory. Those gifts we keep even if the harvest is bad. We keep them through all changes and chances of this life and into the next.

Now, a few minutes unpacking this sequence. First, thanksgiving for the redemption of the world by Christ. Ultimately, this is what Christianity is about. If there is no redemption of the world by Christ, why are we bothering? This statement speaks to the root heresy of the Christian community, the substitution of the word “church” for the word “world.” This is the heresy of the human attempt to limit God’s love. To claim that Christ’s job is to redeem the church alone is heretical – the redemption of the whole of creation is the object of God. The church is one of a number of instruments to enable that. The church itself is not the sole object

of redemption, therefore we give thanks that God is concerned with the world, with all of it, with every out of the way corner, with every distant galaxy, with every cobwebby and quasi-forgotten memory which either rejoices us or from which we hide.

Then, we give thanks for “the means of grace.” These have to do with how we know God, how does God present himself to us? There are ordinary means of grace, means known and counted on, means embedded in our traditions, means which can be repeated: the Eucharist and other sacraments and aspects of the church. Then there are extraordinary means of grace, the means by which God becomes apparent to us in unique relations and special circumstances. These things are largely unique and non-repeatable. An example of this is the presence of God in the natural world. Each such experience of God in nature is unique. It cannot be counted on every time one takes a walk in the woods, the encounter is not guaranteed in the subject matter.

But we are not concerned with such distinctions in our thanksgiving. The means of grace for which we are thankful are constituted by anything which opens the door between God and ourselves. Scripture, if used with the proper spirit can be a means of grace. So can a good play in Ashland or at the auditorium of the local high school. So can, again, read in the proper spirit, a Dostoevsky novel. So also a cup of coffee with a friend. The world is full of the means of grace. The job of the church, and therefore one job of the Christian among others, is to simply take them for what they are. We don’t create means of grace, to a large extent, at least. Our fundamental job is to recognize the gift when it is given, to recognize the gift as a gift and accept it as such. But we give thanks for anything which helps us know God, which opens the door between God and ourselves. It is not a matter of good or bad, of morals, but of giving and receiving and of a willingness to receive.

Finally, the hope of glory. Biblically, glory has a somewhat deceptive meaning. It does not mean being confronted by a situation requiring dark glasses. Glory is the palpable presence of God, without barrier or with greatly reduced barriers, between ourselves and him. To experience glory is to experience the immediacy of God. In Eastern Orthodox theology, glory is a technical term which denotes whichever aspects of God can be known by human beings. We hope for the experience of God, the knowledge of God, in the Biblical sense of that word, which will allow us the immediate presence of ultimate being as the foundation upon which our lives are lived.

So these three things are the foundation of the life of thanks giving. First, our assurance of God’s good will and positive action towards the world, that’s redemption in Christ, which spreads a great ways beyond the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Second, the means of grace, all those things in the present which open the door between God and us. Finally, the hope of glory, the sense that there is somewhere to go which is, indeed, worth the journey.

Notice that gathered up into these things are the three temporal aspects of human life. The redemption of the world by Christ is something which we know about in a significant way by looking at the past, especially at Jesus of Nazareth – although it extends into the present as the Word. The means of grace can only be experienced and used in the present. The hope of glory ties where we are going, but have not yet arrived, into the past and the present. It is, after all,

this hope that makes the present life of the Christian what it is. In this prayer we have a giving of thanks which encompass the entire temporal spectrum of our existence.

That's important, because if these objects for which we give thanks did not, we could not base a whole human life upon them. Full human lives need to tie together past, present and future into a unity of being. If that unity of being is not present, then there is some form of spiritual pathology. When you think about Thanksgiving Day, I would, therefore, encourage an enlargement of perspective. This enlargement is stated by this basic list of what there is, ultimately and finally, to be thankful about: the redemption of the world, God's choice to be involved and to remain involved; the means of grace, all those multitudinous ways of knowing God; and the hope of glory, the belief that there is, indeed, somewhere worthwhile to go. This somewhere to go brings us into the immediate presence of ultimate being.

So, that's my suggestion about making Thanksgiving Day into a Christian and theological holiday in addition to a national one. For a mid-week service, I think that's quite enough sermon.