

Thursday, November 24, 2016
The Rev. Timothy Cole
Thanksgiving Sermon

One of the most wonderful feelings I can remember is walking along a cliff top overlooking the sea in Cyprus in the summer of 2008. It was a beautiful sunny day and I suppose one would have been glad to be there under any circumstances but for those of us who were there that day it was all the more so because it was the first day we had been in a safe place for over 8 months. Were returning from a hard tour in Iraq and everything seemed brand new. The Army sent us for 48 hours to Cyprus to decompress before letting us loose on our families and the lives we had left behind. It is strange but you don't think much about the threat that hangs around every day in theatre when you are there unless something particular happens but once you are suddenly set free from it you realize that a burden has been lifted off you in a wonderful way. Not only that, but all the ordinary things we all take for granted but that we had been without for all those months were suddenly ours once more. We could have a decent shower, drink a beer, swim in the sea and sleep in a normal bed. All just blessed!

Of course, after a few days that amazing sense of relief and gratitude wore off. We got used to having the things we had missed again and we were no longer quite so glad and grateful as we were that day but I still remember that feeling. Gangs of grown men and women playing like children by the sea side. Marvelous!

All thanksgiving is a bit like that isn't it? A big part of it is bringing back together people who are living and working apart. Families gather around the same table once more and they are thankful for each other partly because they have not had been together for some time. We are most thankful for what we have when we have not had it for a while.

Doubtless if we all stayed on together after Thanksgiving, we would soon not feel as thankful. Human beings get used to where they are.

If that seems sad - that we can't remain thankful for long and that we tend to take situations, things and people for granted after a while then we should realize that that is what makes us the adaptable and resilient creatures that we are.

Human beings can get used to almost anything. Soldiers can live in a bleak desert compound and patrol everyday across ground where every step may be on an IED and every rock and piece of rough ground might hide grievous injury or death. People can learn to live without a huge amount of what they normally have and get used to their circumstances.

Feast and fast are two sides of the same coin. Our ability to cope with the former makes us able to truly enjoy the later all the more.

I suppose we Episcopalians are more known for our feasts than our fasts and, if you have to err on the one side, then I am glad we err on that one. "God's lambs must play" and life is short enough when all is said and done but we need to miss things and people to truly be thankful for them.

There is a deeper level to this as well. I remember my father used to irritate me as a teenager because, from time to time, he would look up in his garden or around the dinner table and say

“Aren’t we lucky!” At the time I didn’t really think so. We had good life but my parents had little enough in some ways. They never were able to go abroad on holiday until my brother was 23. Looking back though I realize what he was saying I think. He and my mother had lived through WW2 and he had survived 5 years of fighting as an infantry soldier despite being seriously wounded in Burma. He felt lucky and blessed and thankful on a level that a 12-year-old me could not even begin to fathom. He was thankful, not for a moment, because he had regained something he had missed but rather because his life had been spared and every day was a bonus.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor ... The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm....; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

I think my father really felt that, and it did influence the way he lived. His ministry as a priest was one given, largely in thankfulness, like many others who gave their lives to ordained service after the war was finished. It was a response in thanks.

Nathan Morton in 1620 looked back from the other side of this equation when the first settlers landed on these shores.

“Being now passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before them in expectations, they had now no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh them, no houses, or much less towns, to repair unto to seek for succor; and for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of the country know them to be sharp and violent, subject to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search unknown coasts.

Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wilde beasts and wilde men?

If they looked behind them, there was a mighty ocean which they had passed, and was now as a main bar or gulph to separate them from all the civil parts of the world.”

In light of this vision of harsh reality, there is all the more reason for the first thanksgiving in that colony a year later, when, a little more than half the original 100 settlers entertained the local native Indians and celebrated their hard won survival of their first terrible winter in that desolate wilderness and their first successful harvest.

And down the years this thanksgiving has, as we know, developed as a response to hardship and conflict survived and as a sense of gratitude for life itself and those aspects of it that have been hard won. George Washington called for thanksgiving for the liberty won in the Revolutionary War in 1789, Abraham Lincoln in 1863 as the tide of the civil war turned in the North’s favor.

And now, on this my first thanksgiving on these shores - hardly now a desolate wilderness (!) - but still a place where the struggles and hardships of life assail all of us in one way or another. Still a place where liberty is debated and struggled for, where great opportunity is mixed with all the disappointments and trials of human life. Still a place where we are glad to take the opportunity to look around us at the eyes of those we love and say - despite everything - ‘aren’t we lucky.’

And our response? Well - our lives are our response. If our hearts are full of gratitude then there will be no room for bitterness and anger, no room for resentment and revenge. There will just be the humility of those who know they have been spared when others have not; the kindness of those who know God has been kind to them and the gladness of those who see God's light in the eyes of the people they meet. These things and the desire to do some small good with the days they we have left to us on this blessed earth are the signs of a thankful heart and a thankful life.

Of course not all can see how they are very lucky in anyway in their lives. Sometimes, life rises up to strike at us and takes away so much that there is just no room for gratitude in us. That is where we must turn to something deeper than being glad for the things that are going well and for the people we love.

“Jesus said I am the bread of life. Who ever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” We who come to begin this great national thanksgiving here at this altar do so knowing that we here have access to an absolute good that no tragedy or crushing blow that life can level at us can take away. Here we have food for our souls and a reason to be thankful always. Here we walk the cliffs of Cyprus in the sunshine every week. Here there is no threat, no burden to carry. Just the knowledge that we are his, and for that above all things, we are thankful.

A very Happy Thanksgiving to you all