

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole  
Thanksgiving Day  
Thursday, November 22, 2018

*Joel 2:21-27 | Psalm 126  
1 Timothy 2:1-7 Matthew 6:25-33*

I was looking for definitions for Thanksgiving and found this. “Thanksgiving is a traditional American Holiday where families all over the United States sit for dinner at the same time—Halftime!” Well we will see how the Redskins do today against the Cowboys. It’s wonderful for me that the game we regularly played as children in the Rectory garden in Scotland with cap guns and bows and arrows, is still being played!!

Of course it is not always straightforward, this family Thanksgiving thing, is it? I read recently of a man in Florida, in his 80s, who called his son in New York one November day. The father says to the son, “I hate to tell you, but we’ve got some troubles here in the house. Your mother and I can’t stand each other anymore, and we’re getting a divorce. I’ve had it! I want to live out the rest of my years in peace. I’m telling you now, so you and your sister shouldn’t go into shock later when I move out.” He hangs up, and the son immediately calls his sister in the Hamptons and tells her the news.

The sister says, “I’ll handle this.” She calls Florida and says to her father, “Don’t do ANYTHING till we get there! We’ll be there Wednesday night.”

The father agrees, “All right.”

The old man hangs up the phone and shouts to his wife, “Okay, Dear they’ve decided to come for Thanksgiving after all. Now, what are we going to tell them for Christmas?” You have to be wise as serpents and doves when it comes to children!

Come, ye thankful people, come,  
raise the song of harvest home;  
all is safely gathered in,  
ere the winter storms begin.  
God our Maker doth provide  
for our wants to be supplied;  
come to God's own temple, come,  
raise the song of harvest home.

I have a very early memory of Thanksgiving in Scotland as a small child. The Church was bedecked with produce. Bread baked to look like wheat sheaves, baskets of shiny apples and musty pears, small sacks of earthy potatoes, all lay around the altar. Other containers filled with bright colored vegetables, tinned food and loaves of bread and any thing that came from the land in some way, lay on window sills and at the foot of the lectern and the pulpit. I remember the smell of it all and the sense of gladness all around. People came to Church who didn’t usually come. Hardy looking men from the farms nearby with tweed jackets and red faces that looked like they didn’t dress smartly very often. Not that any of us worked on the land! We lived in a suburb on the edge of a city. There were farms nearby but we were all city folk.

Yet we still celebrated the safe gathering of the harvest on the Sunday nearest the Harvest Moon (which is a bit earlier in the year than here, near the end of September or the beginning of October usually). It is a thanksgiving that goes back to pagan times. People have always been glad of the harvest because, in days gone by, it didn't always happen.

One of our occasional parishioners is particularly on my mind this Thanksgiving. He is currently in Baghdad in Iraq serving as a Senior Commander of a significant part of the American and Multinational operations in the Middle East at this time. He emailed me the other day to say that he had listened to my Sermon on November 11. I find it very moving to think of him and all the other serving personnel out there, and that Christ Church is able to reach out across the world to touch and support at least one of them in that way. We never know just how far our words and actions travel; how far the ripples of our lives spread outward across the lake of human experience. That email brought back a flood of memories for me, some sad, some bad and all mixed in with a sea of smiling faces and laughter, sometimes in the most unfunny of situations.

As I sat down to write this sermon I confess that I did not feel overly thankful. I know it is pathetic, given how fortunate we all are to be in this wonderful Church, in this delightful neighborhood, in this amazing City and in this quite remarkable country, but, as I mentioned the other week, I think it is only next to scarcity and hardship that we can truly be thankful for plenty and ease. We may know how lucky we are but we do not always feel as grateful because we are so used to what we have.

That email from Baghdad served to remind me, that, today, I have so much to be thankful for on so many different accounts. I am thankful for those times in those grim, mostly bleak and dangerous places, in those battered and broken countries. Grateful because of the young soldiers with whom I was so privileged to share just a small part of their experience there. When I think of those times, I am also very thankful to be here where family and safety and comfort are the order of the day. Memories like these open our hearts to gratitude, not least for the service of those in uniform all across the world who are spending this Thanksgiving away from their families in order that we might be with ours in safety today and every day.

Nathaniel Morton in 1620 looked back across the same ocean the other way, not from there to here, but from here to there, as he looked back to the unseen home he had left behind, to come, with some of the first British settlers, to these shores. He famously reflects:

“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 was all the more reason for the first heartfelt thanksgiving in that colony a year later, when, a little more than half the original 100 settlers survived to entertain the local native Americans and to celebrate their hard-won survival of their first terrible winter in that desolate wilderness and their first successful harvest by which they knew their lives had been spared.

And down the years Thanksgiving in this country 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. Thanksgiving has come to mean more than just gratitude for the harvest here. It seems to me as someone still relatively new, that it has come to mean thankfulness for life itself and for the way of life that has so flourished this great country.

And now, on this my third Thanksgiving on these shores, I realize that I too am full of thankfulness for this land – 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 – as my father used to say at such times, “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 we have left to us on this blessed earth are the signs of a thankful heart and a thankful life. Such a response is possible in Georgetown as well as in Baghdad and everywhere.

Of course not all can see how they are very lucky in any way 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. In today's Gospel Jesus asks us to look beyond the anxieties and cares of life, real though they are. “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

Those piles of fruit and vegetables in the little Scottish Church, the tiny gathering of 50 survivors and their local guests in 1620, sharing the meagre fruits of the desolate wilderness, this offering of our thanks in this Holy Eucharist today, all remind us that we are held in the mind and heart of God and point us to the high service, in our thanks, God calls us to.

“But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”

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 there is no threat, no burden to carry. Just the knowledge that we are His, and for that, above all things, we are thankful.

Come, ye thankful people, come,  
come to God's own temple, come,  
raise the song of harvest home.

A very Happy Thanksgiving to you all and to all who serve in our name who may hear this in desolate wildernesses far from these now blessed shores.