

Deuteronomy 8: 7-18
Psalm 65
II Corinthians 9: 6-15
St. Luke 17: 11-19

Harvest Thanksgiving 2023

“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”
I Thessalonians 5: 18

Every time a hymn book is put together, the compilers have to make choices, about what music to include, and what to exclude. In the most recent Anglican hymn book, *Common Praise*, I regret the omission of the hymn, “This Is My Father’s World...” Will you join stand (if you are able), to join me?

This is my Father's world,
And to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings
The music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world:
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas--
His hand the wonders wrought.

The last verse is particularly helpful, when we are facing troubled times like today:

This is my Father's world:
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.
This is my Father's world:
The battle is not done;
Jesus, who died, shall be satisfied,
And heaven and earth be one.

This weekend, many Canadians are celebrating Harvest Thanksgiving. We give thanks to God for the food we have, to nourish us and sustain us...

For Christians, though, our sense of thanksgiving is meant to be broader than food alone... We are meant to give thanks and praise to God. God has certainly given us food to enjoy, but gives us so much else as well – our very lives; the beautiful world in which we live; family and friends and so forth... We are also encouraged to give thanks for the things which we cannot see, but which are just as real: For forgiveness, love and life through Jesus Christ; for eternal life; for the gift of one another in the community of the Church; and so many more blessings...

It can be easy to fall into the habit of being grumpy and complaining. In contrast, though, with the help of God's Spirit, we're invited to have attitudes of gratitude and thanksgiving, for all the blessings around us, and within us...

It's wise for us all to recall that we are really stewards – managers – of what has been entrusted to our care... Without God, we would be nothing. Our creative God has created us and redeemed us. If we speak about ownership at all, God is the true “Owner” of all things... However, like the manager of the vineyard in the parables of Jesus, you and I are entrusted to be managers – stewards... We are called to look after our bodies, and one another. We are called to look after this beautiful world. We are called to manage our money well, and to be good stewards of our time and other resources...

You and I are already managers. The question we face is, What *kind* of managers of our resources are we? Are we being good managers of all that has been entrusted to our care; or are we squandering or careless of everything – everything – that has been entrusted to us?...

When we read Paul's letters, it is remarkable how often Paul gives thanks – even during terrible circumstances. For example, Paul wrote some of his later letters from prison (he had been imprisoned for sharing Christ). Yet, Paul isn't complaining or miserable about his circumstances. Instead, he is overflowing with gratitude and thanksgiving. For example, the Letter to the Philippians begins, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.” One of the last sentences in that letter reads, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God (4: 6)...”

Paul is content, even during hard times: “I have learned to be content with whatever I have (Philippians 4: 11)” It appears that the apostle prayed frequently and fervently with thanksgiving: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you...”

It is relatively easy to thank God during the good times... These verses might make us pause: Do we give thanks to God in *all* circumstances? Can we see opportunities to be thankful, even in the hard times?...

In today's readings, we see two times when the biblical writers gave thanks – and encourage *us* to give thanks – when it might not seem so easy...

The first example in today's readings about thankfulness is when St. Paul is writing about money, in today's second lesson. It appears that Paul was undertaking what we would call a fund-raiser in the congregation. (This might have been when the early Christians were anticipating a food shortage in the Jerusalem area. It was simply taken for granted in the early Church that we are to care for one another, including sharing food and resources...)

It's assumed that the Corinthian congregation would care for one another and for their families, and so forth. Equally, the letter takes for granted that we are called to share our resources to provide for the ministry of the Church, and for relief of the world's needs outside the local Church... Yet, Paul goes further, doesn't he? Not only is he inviting the congregation to share, but to share willingly and even joyfully – not by complaining. As we bless others, we ourselves are blessed. II Corinthians 9:

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

We can tell a lot about what the congregation is like by how St. Paul writes in reply. If St. Paul is writing, encouraging them to have gratitude and enthusiasm when they contribute financially, this suggests that the congregation in Corinth was giving – but maybe, there was a little grumbling – or at least, financial giving was regarded as a duty, not as a joy...

Now, these words were penned a very long time ago. But are we really that different today? A national Ipsos poll this past summer shows that more than 8 in 10 Canadians are anxious about living costs. Of course we need to live responsibly – and that includes being responsible managers of the money with which we've been entrusted... But part of the Christian package, part of the gospel, is that we share our resources generously, even joyfully... A fellow priest (now deceased) to whom I owe a great deal is Canon David Reid, who said to me years ago, "Give until it feels good..."

So, here is one example where we can express generosity and thankfulness from today's readings – how we use the money entrusted to our care responsibly and joyfully...

Today's second example of a somewhat more challenging reason to give thanks is from Deuteronomy. Now, many parts of the Bible's Old Testament were passed on orally – that is, the stories would be told and re-told for generations, and were written down much later. When we read today's first lesson, we read all about the abundance of the land where the people lived – the abundant fresh water, wild food and cultivated food to be eaten. Deuteronomy is soaked with the conviction that the resources of the world around us are a gift from our wonderful creative God...

However, let's take a moment to recall what had been taking place in the Jewish world when these words were written down – the people of Judah had been going through a terrible time... The northern territory had been destroyed by the invading Assyrians. Almost all Jewish kings of the period ranged from the pretty good to the awful. There were quarrels and external threats and political struggles. This proclamation of God's care was very likely taking place in the context of some really tough times...

Are we so different? True, the exact circumstances have changed. We don't need to be worried about a Babylonian invasion in North Bay... Yet, I venture to say that there isn't a single person in this room who hasn't had some tough times. Maybe we're living in them right now... There can be sickness or job troubles or troubles in our marriages. Maybe we're worried about our adult children. Maybe we're facing a crisis... We don't like it, do we?...

Of course we don't want bad things to happen to us, or to those we love. We need to work together to reduce suffering... Even in the midst of the dark valleys, though, let's keep focused on our living Lord. Even in the darkest times, he saw his people through... That continues with you and me today...

We get the point: "In *everything*, give thanks." Of course we give thanks for Jesus Christ (that's a sermon in itself). Even during the bumpy times, or when we aren't inclined to be thankful, we're invited to move to gratitude, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God.