

## "IN EVERYTHING GIVE THANKS"

TEXT: "In everything give thanks: for this is the  
will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you"  
(I Thessalonians 5: 18)

INTRODUCTION Of all the verses in the Bible, why this one? Of all the times for hearing such a word, why now? I feel that in a way I was driven to this text against my will, against my better judgement. In those secret chambers of the heart where one contends with God, I found myself protesting. Surely, I said, one can be more relevant than this - what with fiscal default a real possibility for the city, with unemployment high and prices rising throughout the country, and the nation stunned by two attempts on the President's life since Labor Day.

I struggled, but I could not prevail. So we're stuck - you and I - on this Sunday before Thanksgiving with a word that probably counters our inner preference.

"In everything give thanks: for this is the  
will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you".

BACKGROUND In fairness, let it be noted here at the beginning that these words were written in less than optimum circumstances. They were not penned in a bright, warm room after a full meal. The words belong to St. Paul, and they're part of the first letter that he ever wrote. His infant congregation there in Thessalonica was little more than an itch in the side of a decadent empire. The members there would soon know what persecution was all about.

This little Church had mistakenly believed that Jesus would return soon, and that none of them would die. But Jesus did not return, and some of their number did die. They were in deep discouragement. Their leadership was thin, unconvincing. There was no certainty that the church would survive.

"In everything give thanks: for this is the  
will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you".

DEVELOPMENT Now the truth of this text has a driving force of its own that is not dependent on fair skies or good times.

I think it's important for us to note that Paul was not saying that we should be thankful for everything. We would be less than sane were we to glory in accidents and illnesses. No - not for everything, but "in" everything. That is, in every circumstances - this is the meaning. In every circumstance of life the aim is to maintain a thankful spirit. As you know, this is not easy to do.

Events of these days - locally and nationally - have turned us into a generation of moralists. A lot of people are telling us what's wrong. A surprising number of articles and editorials are suggesting that our crisis is a crisis of the human spirit. Words like soul and morale and purpose and gumption and will are receiving recurring and thoughtful attention. Did you read the article in the NY Times a week ago yesterday entitled "O Nineveh, O New York?" Said the author, McCandlish Phillips:

"This may be the time to swing the ax, not at branches, but at

roots. Some of these roots can be identified in plain words: greed, selfishness, thievery, fraud, ingratitude, hatred, prayerlessness, godlessness, indulgence, jealousy, cheating".

If our crisis is a crisis of the human spirit then crash programs are not the answer, nor the birth of yet another super agency. What is wanted and what is desperately needed is a new attitude. And this brings us back to Paul, for the thanksgiving to which He calls us is not an act, but rather an attitude. It is a steady "yes saying" to life. It is an unquenchable flame at the center of our being that affirms that life is good, that it has ultimate meaning, that higher laws are structured into the fabric of our universe. Therefore, "in everything, give thanks".

But you and I know that thankfulness cannot be commanded, that gratitude cannot be ordered on the spot. It's like saying to someone, "you...over there - be generous". Or, you...sitting back there under the balcony - be happy". Or, "you...down front...be sweet". Not a chance. In other words, it can't be forced. It - thanksgiving - is the product of reflection, and it's well for us to pause occasionally and to think about those for which we should be grateful.

USES OF ADVERSITY I heard a commentator in recent days suggest that we consider the uses of adversity. I mean if you're down there on the floor and things are going bad you might just as well look for a little lift. This is an old and helpful theme. The Church has no monopoly on it. "It's an ill wind that blows no good". "Even the darkest cloud has a silver lining". We've all been down that road.

So, James Boyd writes in a recent magazine article under the title, "The Bright Side of the Recession" and calls our attention to such unnoticed blessings as (1) greater courtesy these days from salespeople (I haven't noticed that myself). (2) wooing letters from banks offering to lend money. (3) a cutback in the manufacturing of cards and more importantly, a reduction in the number of large cards made. (4) a 20% reduction in highway accidents as a result of the 55-mile speed limit. (5) developers and speculators are scrambling to unload their tracts of land, their further exploitation stymied. (6) waste materials are being studied for possible re-use. (7) the birth rate is down. (8) a new interest is developing in do-it-yourself courses and literature. (9) there is less padding of the government payroll. (10) repair shops are doing a brisk business as more people choose to conserve the old rather than purchase the new.

It helps to reflect on such developements, but this is not what St. Paul had in mind.

LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE Others have suggested that we look at the big picture rather than the wallet-sized snapshots of our personal discomfort. This is the school of thought that urges us in the direction of a better perspective. You can't judge life by how it looks as it runs through your little strand. Stand back and look at the larger picture, and you may not be so quick to think those dark thoughts of doom.

And there is something to this, too.

Really, is it catastrophic to enjoy a piece of steak twice a month rather than four times a month in a world where millions are stalked by hunger? Or, is it catastrophic not to be able to trade in for a new car every three years in a world where millions have an annual income of less than five hundred dollars a year?

Is it catastrophic to be asked to work a few more hours a week in a world where millions would give an arm and a leg for an income producing job? Is it catastrophic to have to pay \$1.50 for a bridge crossing in a world where millions wish they had a bridge to cross?

This is not to say that our prain is not real. And certainly it is not to say that there is no authentic, down-to-the bone, sure enough hurt and privation in our city. It is to say that most of us need to get a line on ourselves so that what we feel can be understood in relation to the whole.

TWO AMERICAS Last Winter my 21 year old nephew who is into TM shared with me a copy of the book, Zen and the Art of Motocycle Maintenance. (I'm not a convert to either Zen or the motorcycle), but the book - parts of which I looked over - was good. Toward the end of that work, the author Robert Prisig, helpfully points out that there are two Americas that you and I tend to experience: a Primary America and a Secondary America. He said,

"There's this Primary America of freeways and jet flights and TV and movie spectaculars. And people caught up in this Primary America seem to go through hugh portions of their lives without much consciousness of what's immediately around them. The media have convinced them that what's right around them is unimportant. And that's why they're lonely. You see it in their faces."

In other words - if you're not partaking of the goodies of this technological society, if you wife doesn't look like the young starlet on the tube, of if your car doesn't go quite as fast as the new sports' car, if you're not written up or mentioned now and then in a glossy magazine or large circulation, you're not really alive. And the sad thing is, many of us are stupid enough to believe it.

But the Secondary America is the America right around us: the back roads and the mountain ranges, the rivers and parks and the children at play, and the meditative thoughts and good times and books that we have . Are we poor, or have we been told we are?

*STORY* → Perspective is needed, but that still isn't what Paul had in mind as the subject of his reflection. Perspective, attitude. I heard a a story this week

WHAT PAUL HAD IN MIND What Paul had in mind as the subject of reflection out of which thanksgiving would automatically come was what God had done and is doing for the world in Christ Jesus. That verse of scripture makes it clear: "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you". He was reminding those Christians in Thessalonica that though they were perched precariously on the face of the Roman Empire, they nevertheless were secure with the folds a pledged and demonstrated love.

What Paul was affirming was that the inner gyroscope of their faith was set, steady, secure. When the center holds, no virbrations out there on the circumference can make an absolute difference.

A READINESS TO PRAISE The unmistakable mark of a vibrant, living faith is this readiness to praise. We may not all fast; we may not all kneel; we may subscribe to different forms of Communion and see the priorities of the Church in different ways, but the constant that determines authentic religious experience is this readiness to praise.

And no one understood this better than Habakkuk - that minor prophet whom we avoid because we find it difficult to pronounce his name the same way twice running. It was his misfortune to live at a time when the Chaldean Empire was making some menacing moves. That empire was described as a carnival of wickedness. Even though he lived in such an era, he gave us testimony to a faith that would be tough to surpass:

"Though the fig trees do not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines;  
The produce of the olive fail,  
and the fields yield no food;  
The flock be cut off from the fold,  
and there be no herd in the stalls;  
Yet - I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will joy in the God of my salvation"

Let me try to modernize that for you so that it will more nearly fit our urban, manufacturing society.

"Though the economy continue to stagnate,  
Nor the inflation rate be cured;  
The production of goods be down,  
And the prices still soar;  
The number of bankruptcies increase;  
And there be little relief in sight;  
Though the big apple appear rotten,  
And more crime and garbage be seen in  
our streets,  
Yet - I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will joy in the God of my salvation"

That's where it's at. The last time Job spoke to me I heard him say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust him". And that beautiful hymn of praise with which we close our service today - "Now Thank We All Our God" was written in the midst of famine, pestilence and all of the horrors of the Thirty Years' War.

Button up your coat for a moment to receive one of the coldest pieces of graffiti that you'll ever hear. Is it buttoned, for this will chill you. Somewhere on a wall in California this line appeared, "Life is the flaw in the void". You can't get much colder than that. "Life is the flaw in the void". To that the Christian responds, "Nonsense". It is not a void we are in, for God has brought order out of chaos.

Life is meaningful - full of meaning, purpose to the God you and I have met in the person of Christ. Therefore, "In everything, give thanks" said Paul, "for this is the will of God in Jesus concerning you". To this we are called. And if we who have discerned the ultimate purpose and revelation of God in the person of Christ cannot say "yes" to life even in these difficult, demanding times, I ask you then - who can?

PRAYER Lord, light within our hearts the flame of gratitude that in a grumbling, complaining world, our light may shine. Where our thanksgiving cannot be "because of", let it be, we pray thee, "in spite of". In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen