

"ON BEING THANKFUL FOR THE PRESENT MOMENT"

INTRODUCTION

I often feel that we fail to appreciate the greatness of the time in which we live. For example, so much of the talk that you're apt to hear about our age is not "what a wonderful time to be alive", but rather, "What a terrible time, a fearful time in which to live". There seems to be a kind of conspiracy in the hearts of many against the present. And then Thanksgiving Day rolls around and what is there to say? If our age is so bad, if it is so corrupt and hopeless, what is there now to be grateful for except the past and the glory that is gone.

Long ago out on the plains of Midian was a man names Moses. Having killed an Egyptian taskmaster, he had escaped to the desert to lose himself in the wilderness. For months he had been brooding on the oppression of his people, wondering why somebody didn't do something, as though the God of his fathers had been completely forgotten. Then one day amid the sagebrush and the sand there came this arresting message:

"Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground....."

In other words - this is your moment. This is your opportunity - not in the past - but now! Not in far off places - here! This - ~~this is the~~ place whereon thou standest, this is the holy ground. I think we need on occasion to have this message brought to us.

And so today on this Thanksgiving Sunday when it is our national custom to remember the past and be grateful for its contribution, ~~this year~~ I want to reverse the process - to remember the present and be grateful for its opportunity. "This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it".

DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

My purpose this morning is not to discount the past (we need it so much), but to puncture the false glorification of the past, that instead of bringing inspiration to the present so often becomes the down drag of the present, the enemy of the present. It's a curious trick of the mind that envelopes past history with a halo and glory it never really had and makes the days that are gone seem glamorous and glorious and God filled in comparison with the hard and difficult demands that confront us today. I'm sure that even the people who tend to talk about the "good old days" could never be induced to go back to them. Memory has a way of playing tricks on us. Carlyle use to wonder about that - why the future looked so bright and the past so rosy. He suggested that it was because fear had been extracted from them. The future is so far away, you haven't come to its troubles yet, and the past is so far away, you have forgotten it. So that both, seen through the haze of distance, are illusions.

Perhaps you remember the book, HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY - the story of a man who looks back over his boyhood years; and while the story back there was one of poverty, struggle, and heartbreak, he regards that period of his life - his boyhood, when the family was together, as the time when his valley was most green. It's strange, isn't it. When you are in the valley, you seldom realize it. The green is always some place else.

Vicky Baum in her story, GRAND HOTEL, dramatized this tendency of ours to miss the finest things of life close by, by habitually looking elsewhere for them. When you are young, you think it will come when you are older. When you are older, you think it was back there when you were younger. When you are here, you think it was there. And then when you get there, you find that life has doubled back and it's quietly waiting in the very place you ran away from. It's pretty terrible, this never knowing when we're in it.

All of this brings to mind a story that some of you may have heard before. A farmer had been working the same farm for forty years and was getting a little tired of it. He decided to sell for what he could get. And so he went to the nearest town for an auctioneer and asked him to put the place up for sale. The auctioneer came out to look the place over, took out his pencil and jotted down the various items dealing with the property and then went back to prepare for the big event.

The next morning the farmer went out to his mail box, took out a long manilla envelope, opened it and found what was a printer's proof of an advertising poster announcing the forthcoming sale. The farmer read every word with a great deal of interest till he came to the last line and there he read his own name. His interest turned to bewildered curiosity. He rushed to the telephone, called the auctioneer and said, "Is that my farm". "Why, yes" replied the super-salesman. "Whose farm did you think it was?" The farmer gasped, "Don't sell that farm. Why I've been looking for a farm like that all my life". Maybe some of us need to be auctioneers once in a while.....take stock of the many blessings that we do enjoy.

And isn't it true that school days are something like that - we're always getting ready for the next step. We go to grade school to get ready for high school. Then we go to high school to get ready for college. In college, of course, we're busy getting ready for the profession we have chosen. Then we dig in to prepare for security and promotion. We'll be all set when the mortgage is paid, when the business gets going, when the furniture is all paid for, when the kids grow up and get on their own. Even then you better look out, or some preacher is apt to come along and say to you, "Prepare to meet thy God. This world is only preparation for the next". Tolstoy called it, "The snare of preparation". Somebody once wrote a biography of an American business man and summed up his life's story in this one sentence:

"He was born in the country where he worked like the dickens so he could move to the city where he worked like the dickens so he could move to the country".

Sounds familiar, doesn't it. Dr. Faunce of Brown University once said: "The great reform of education would be to abolish prep schools" by which, of course, he meant getting rid of the idea that education at any stage is a preparation for life. "In a real school" he said, "We're not getting ready for life. We are living. This life in college" he told the freshman class, "is as real as any life you will ever lead. This is living. Whatever you become afterwards will probably be a projection of what you are now". This is your moment, said God. This moment. This place whereon thou standest....this is holy ground - now, here.

GRATEFUL FOR THE NOW This is why, this morning, I'd like to jerk Thanksgiving Day out of the past a bit and a little more into the present - to be grateful for the now. After all, what is it that we admire about those great heroes of yesterday - prophets, apostles, statesman, people we are grateful for? It isn't because they lived in a good time, because they didn't. It isn't because they were super-people. They weren't. We admire them because in a time as discouraging and as difficult as our own, they didn't give in to discouragement. They took what they had in their hands and did something with it!

This is a part of the glory of Thanksgiving Day - in its historical significance. It is a mistake to idealize the Pilgrims and picture them as saints with halos around their heads. They weren't. But there is something powerful and unforgettable in what they did. Think of it - the first Thanksgiving Day held on this continent did not come out of prosperity and affluence. It came out of adversity, out of pitiful poverty.

And in their poverty, in their time of adversity they gave thanks to God! They didn't say, "Some day God will come to America and do great thing for its people". They said, "H is here now." And looking back across the years we know how right they were. God was moving in their midst, using them to create something good, something different on the face of this earth. It must not have been easy for them to see God in their own time and under those hard and difficult circumstances. It's never easy to see God in one's own time. It's always easier to see him in some lovely, green valley of the past.

You may wonder why we suggest this to be a great time, a great age for which to be thankful. It's not because things are lovely, serene and happy for all of God's children, for they're not! Our present age stands trembling between fear and prayerful hope. It stands wavering between complete chaos and new creative thrusts. The thing that's great about it is its possibility, its potential - this unprecedented chance for forward movement, this chance to leave the low vaulted past, to serve as instruments in God's hand to make new, exciting possibilities come true. Our world is changing and changing rapidly. It's a time of turmoil, tension, revolution and rapid social change and we have opportunity to help make some changes for the good. "Man has come of age" said Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He is breaking with the past in many ways. And generations to come will look back on this time and examine what we have done. And whether they remember us with honor or with censure will depend on the response we make to the demands of this difficult time - whether we drive ahead with faith and confidence, making strong our position, and make this truly a meeting place with God who is the Father of all men. It is a difficult age, but it is an exciting one in which to live because of its possibilities.

Of consider it this way: are you walking a lonely, difficult road. Be careful now. This may turn out to be your finest hour when with courage, with dignity you rise up to meet the demands of some new experience life has put in your path. And so often the most likely place to find God is right smack in the middle of a hard and difficult road, in the middle of trouble. And the best opportunities are there, in it, too. A small boy once asked his father: "Why are all the vitamins in spinach and not in ice cream where they ought to be?" We don't know why. That's the way it so often is. The vitamins are in the spinach and God is there in every wilderness experience of life.

I wish I could make this come home to us this Thanksgiving time - right down in our own personal lives - one by one - an appreciation of this moment, to be grateful for the now, the chance that God is giving us right now to do something significant, to build a better way of life for the people of this nation. I suppose we often fool ourselves in thinking that if things were different, we would be different. If we were somewhere else or somebody else, we would be the vital, helpful people we dream of being. I question this, however. If a person is cynical about life now, he would have been cynical in the time of Moses and blocked God's purpose with doubt. If a person can't be thankful on this coming Thanksgiving Day for what he has, he would certainly not have been thankful at Plymouth Rock. It's so easy to fool ourselves with the haze of distance.

WHAT IS IN YOUR HAND

We read in Exodus that God said to Moses, "What is in your hand". What is in your hand? What are you doing with the present moment, the present opportunity - with the here, the now. What are you doing with what you have been given to help shape and mold a better life for those to come? What are you doing with your life. ~~"As long as you have to be somebody" said a famous soprano - "you might as well be yourself". Obviously there is not much hope in wishing for something else. There's only one life you can live - that is the one you are living. Only one time in which to live it - that is now, the time you are now living in. What are you doing with it. How do you regard it. Are you willing to share it?~~

Perhaps you've heard the story about the young Scots minister who came from the highlands of Scotland to the city of Glasgow - his first assignment. He had never seen slums. Back in the highlands, he had never known the city & the kind of poverty, the filth that breed in the city. Oh how the problems of the city weighed heavily on his heart. Depressed, overburdened, he was ready to quit, to go somewhere else. He talked things over with another preacher, Thomas Chalmers - the great Scots preacher. One day Dr. Chalmers was walking across the bridge that spanned the river and noticed the young preacher leaning over the balustrade, looking out over the grimy city that sprawled beneath him. "Young man" Chalmers said, with one hand on the boy's shoulder and the other out over the city, "Young man - what a grand field of operation. Big problems to wrestle with here. And aren't you glad to be alive and here to have a go at them".

"Big problems to wrestle with." It's good to be alive and here to have a go at them. I hope this is the way you feel! It's a great time in which to be alive. Let us be thankful for it, for the now, for this place, for the opportunity to have a personal share in lifting things up, improving things, the opportunity to take hold at some point and make things better. Who knows? Perhaps at some distant point, we shall look back and say of this time, of this moment: "Surely the Lord was in this place and we knew it not. The place whereon we stand is holy ground".

LET US PRAY God, Our Father, at this season of national thanksgiving, our hearts are deeply stirred with gratitude for the abundant way in which thou hast blessed us and the land in which we live. We give thee thanks, this hour, for the chance to be alive at this time, and we beseech thee that in our thanksgiving in our praise, a measure of patience may be wrought in our restless hearts, with grace to do thy will and get it done on earth. In the spirit of Christ we pray.