

"REFLECTIONS ON THANKSGIVING"

INTRODUCTION

Last Thanksgiving there was a full page ad on the last page of the first section of the New York Times that caught my eye. There was a picture of an attractive young lady and next to her were these words: somewhat seductive

"What am I thankful for this Thanksgiving? Plenty. My health is frisky and vibrant, my job's still challenging and satisfying. I love my boss. I have fabulous friends and a lifestyle I've always wanted - plus - best of all - a terrific man who is in love with me. My favorite magazine tells me to 'rejoice'...it's a great time to be a woman in this best of all possible times for women, in a city I adore. I love that magazine. I guess you could say I'm that COSMOPOLITAN GIRL!"

Health, work, friends, lifestyle, love, the city - indeed, a great time to be alive! It's all there...expressed perhaps in words and in a way that we might not put it, but we do have so many things for which to be thankful - personal blessings - as we approach Thanksgiving. It's a fine day, a special day, clutter it as we sometimes do with indigestion and football. Basically, it's a time of the spirit when we let it be, and a time of the heart, despite ourselves.

DEVELOPMENT

Against the long traditions that lie behind our day of Thanksgiving, and especially against the scene of that first Thanksgiving in 1621, I would like us to remind ourselves that this holiday is not really an American innovation. Its roots are long and its traditions are hallowed in the long experience of man on this earth.

Noah, back there in the Old Testament, after the great flood, offered prayers of thanksgiving to God. And as the Hebrew nation grew, the days of thanksgiving to God for His deliverance and guidance of them through its history were carefully observed. The Book of Judges tells of the feast of the in-gathering where it is written:

"And they went out into the fields and gathered their vineyards and trod the grapes and held festival and went into the house of their God, and did eat and drink".

TODAY

America and the world have changed enormously since the first Thanksgiving 360 years ago. From a tiny coastal enclave on an untamed continent, we have grown into the mightiest and freest nation in human history.

But the fundamental meaning of Thanksgiving still remains the same. It is a time when the differences of a diverse people are forgotten, and all people in this land join in giving thanks to God for the blessings we share - the blessings of freedom, of opportunity, of abundance that make America unique.

This year, in the midst of plenty, we still face serious problems and massive challenges. In giving thanks for the many things we hold dear, let us also pray for the courage, the resourcefulness and the sense of purpose we will need to continue America's saga of progress and to be worthy heirs of the

Pilgrim spirit. May we, too, find the strength and the vision to leave behind us a better world and an example that will inspire future generations to new achievements.

ENDANGERED HOLIDAY?

There was much to do a couple of years ago over an editorial that appeared in the National Observer that placed Thanksgiving on the list of "endangered species". The language was blunt and gave us reason for discomfort. Wrote Douglas Looney,

"Thanksgiving is the one holiday we have left to do what Americans are best at - gorging themselves without conscience, unnecessarily and inexplicably. Thanksgiving works because it has absolutely no redeeming social value..."

One would like to think that "social value" is precisely what Thanksgiving is rich in. Is it not a time of sharing? Is it not a time of "praising the Lord for His bounty?" Is it not a time for remembering the blessings that are ours? And in our rejoicing, do we not give solemn thought to the plight of the needy, the poor, the unfed, the less fortunate. So goes the litany that has shaped our past holidays. But, there are those who have moments when they wonder and question if it's still valid. Some would claim it is not.

"So love Thanksgiving while you can, folks" he concluded, "Because the government is likely either to move it to the 4th of August, or to cancel it altogether on the grounds that the Pilgrims were white and Protestant, and that's offensive to - well, who the heck knows?"

Funny reading, to be sure, but it struck me then, and it did again this week, as a rather graceless conclusion to a fine essay with some disturbing insights. Reading it again this week, I was struck by its relevance to the concerns and comments we hear from time to time about the gluttony and the hypocrisy of Thanksgiving, set against the backdrop of world hunger.

I think that what is hopeful about America today is not this cool cynicism, but the lurking sense of uneasiness and shame over that cynicism. There are people of conscience among us and around us who remember some words of Jesus, "I was hungry and you fed me...and as you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me". That bit of history from 360 years ago that launched a billion turkeys into an infinite bog of cranberry sauce does have "social value" if it reminds us of that Biblical truth "that of those to whom much is given, much is also expected". I've often wished that we had three or four Thanksgiving Days each year. Not simply to remind us of our blessings, but to renew our sense of pity - and outrage - for the unblest of our land.

BACK TO THE COSMOPOLITAN GIRL

Back to the Cosmopolitan Girl whom we quoted at the outset. This word "cosmopolitan" means "to belong to the world...at home...in any country...not local...without prejudice". I would like to challenge that cosmopolitan girl and others like her to be essentially more cosmopolitan in their view, to look out on the world and let their sensibilities be sensitized by the suffering of others...to celebrate Thanksgiving with a conscience.

Pilgrim spirit. May we, too, find the strength and the vision to leave behind us a better world and an example that will inspire future generations to new achievements.

FAIL TO SEE HOW BLESSED WE ARE

You know, at times I think we fail to see how truly blessed we are in this land. ~~We have been given so very much...our lives have been blessed in so many ways. Yet, many there are who tomorrow will fail to breathe a quiet prayer of thanksgiving to their Creator.~~

There are some people who gripe and grumble and go through life complaining when they ought to be giving thanks. I heard a story recently about two boys - one was a bit of a pessimist...always finding fault...always complaining...and the other boy was an optimist...always looking on the bright side and often stopping to say "thank you".

One boy was put in a room filled with many lovely toys...toys from FAO Schwartz...the best that money could buy...a tricycle, an electric train, an ice cream cone...just to name a few. And the second boy was put in a room filled with manure. Well, after a few minutes, the first child began to complain bitterly. The wheel would come off the tricycle; the tracks for the train would easily get bent, the ice cream cone was melting. And so on. In other words, nothing pleased him. You know the type!

The second boy in the room filled with manure found a shovel in the corner and began to dig diligently. After a few minutes, he was heard to say, "There must be a pony somewhere under all of this".

Some people -

Sometimes ~~we~~ have to dig a bit in order to find reasons for gratitude...

BACK TO THE COSMOPOLITAN GIRL

but they'll find them -

*football
basket-
ball -*

We solve no social problems....whether we feast or fast on Thanksgiving Day. But an American who does not - in some fashion - pause to breathe a word of thanks and share his bread and meat, his warmth and wine, is perhaps the most unblest of all.

CLOSING Lastly...and perhaps surprisingly...these Pilgrims knew how to have a bit of fun and a good time. Mencken once defined a Puritan as a person, "haunted by the fear that somewhere, someone might be happy". But the Pilgrims, in the best tradition of the Old Testament, tithed in order to throw a party. The Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 14 and verses 22 - 27 provides us with the instruction that must have helped to undergird that first Thanksgiving. Let me just read a few verses:

"You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year.

And before the Lord your God, in the place which He shall choose, to make His name dwell there...you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil...that you may learn to fear the Lord, your God, always."

I see the adverse times ahead as the Pilgrims obviously saw theirs...tiring, demanding, but a good proving ground for persistence and reliability. I see adverse times bringing us closer to one another and hopefully closer to God. I see excess being replaced by a generous "give and take" that is the shining characteristic of that first Thanksgiving of 1621...and typically so-American.

And I see places in our own city where tomorrow people will come together for spontaneous and lavish celebrations of Thanksgiving and where for a few moments the ghosts of Governor Bradford, Miles Standish, Priscilla and John Alden will visit them.

It's entirely possible that on that day long ago the Pilgrims read these words which are from the Bible and with which I close:

"Give and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap; because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back."

Happy Thanksgiving to you all. . . MAY YOU CELEBRATE THANKS -

GIVING WITH CONSCIENCE, REMEMBERING

"TO WHOM MUCH HAS BEEN GIVEN. . .

MUCH IS ALSO EXPECTED" —

"NOTHING IS SO STRONG AS GENTLENESS —

NOTHING IS SO GENTLE AS REAL STRENGTH"

I heard a story this week - talking about attitude - which points up in a delightful way the difference between the pessimist and the optimist. As I recall the story, two boys were involved. One boy was put in a room filled with many lovely toys....toys from FAO Schwartz...the best money could buy....a tricycle, an electric train, an ice cream cone....just to name a few.

And the second boy was put in a room filled with manure. Well, after a few minutes, the first child began to complain bitterly. The wheel would come off the tricycle; the tracks for the train would easily be bent; the ice cream cone would melt. And so on...in other words, nothing pleased him.

The second boy in the room filled with manure found a shovel and began to dig diligently. After a few moments, he was heard to say: "There must be a pony somewhere under all of this".

An affirmative attitude and perspective help, but that still isn't what Paul had in mind.

We solve no social problems...whether we feast or fast on Thanksgiving Day. But an American who does not - in some fashion - pause to breathe a word of thanks and share his bread and meat, his warmth and his wine, is perhaps the most unblest of all.

HAVE FUN

Lastly, and perhaps surprisingly, these Pilgrims knew how to have fun. Mencken once defined a Puritan as a person, "haunted by the fear that somewhere someone might be happy". But the Pilgrims, in the best tradition of the Old Testament, tithed in order to throw a party. The Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 14 and verses 22 - 27 provides us with the instruction that must have informed their first Thanksgiving.

"You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year. And before the Lord your God, in the place which he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil...that you may learn to fear the Lord you God always....."

I see the adverse times ahead as a Pilgrims obviously saw theirs...tiring, but a good proving ground for persistence and reliability. I see adverse times bring us closer to God and to one another. I see excess being replace by a generous give and take that is the shining characteristic of that first Thanksgiving. I think there are places in our city where people will come together tomorrow for spontaneous and lavish celebrations of Thanksgiving and the ghosts of Governor Bradford, Miles Standish, Priscilla and John Alden will visit them.

Perhaps on that day long ago the Pilgrims read these words which are from the Bible and with which I close:

"Give and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured onto your lap; because the amount you measure out if the amount you will be given back".

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving!