

"THANKSGIVING - 1970"

INTRODUCTION

One day in the year we meet together to count our blessings - not as individuals, but as a people, as a nation. Next Thursday is the day that has been set aside for us to do this. We are asked to give thanks for the good things that have been given to us - not personally, but nationally. Some will take time to do this, but most, unfortunately, will not. On this Sunday then before our day of national Thanksgiving, I would like to consider with you some things, thoughts tied in with gratitude and national greatness.

DEVELOPMENT

One may say, but what is there to be thankful for this year? Crime and violence in the streets, poverty and frustration in the ghettos, drugs for sale on every corner, unrest on the campus, strikes involving schools, newspapers, postmen, transit systems, civil and racial revolution at home, unpopularity abroad - what is there to be thankful for this year?

Another man may say, why there are so many things for which to be thankful this year that I hardly know just where to begin. This man may begin with the fact that the war has been winding down and not up for some time, that the loss of life on both sides is so much less than it was a year or two years ago. He may go on to mention the talks on disarmament between the two major powers, or the cease fire (State Dept) that was worked out this summer between the Arab nations and Israel. He may go from there to cite the fact that the schools, the universities, and yes, even the churches are working hard to reform themselves. Even the idea that the human family shouldn't poison itself and choke on its own garbage is making more and more progress. ~~Admittedly, the headlines can be black and menacing, but the long range tendencies and the trends of public life and the concern of people provide us with more hope than the daily headlines.~~ This second man may say that we may not be able to solve our problems today, but we are facing them. For all these things and many more, he is thankful.

WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

What is it that makes the difference between these two people? They both live in the same world, in the same country, and perhaps, in the same city. Yes, you may say, but one lives on Park Avenue at 90th Street with all the advantages and privileges thereof, and the other, shall we say, lives at Park Avenue and 100th Street with all the disadvantages and none of the privileges. That's what makes the difference. But which one lives where? That you cannot say because it may very well be that the person who lives at the second address with the disadvantages that are imposed upon him in the ghetto, may be the very person who has so many things for which to be thankful that he doesn't know where to begin, while the man who feels he has nothing for which to be thankful may live at the more comfortable first address on Park Avenue and 90th Street. It is entirely possible.

The difference, you see, is in the people. They are something like the two men who looked at the sun at high noon. One in his excitement said, "The sun has reached the peak of its glory"; the other looked at it and said gloomily, "the sun has begun to set."

Now it is true that some people have an uncanny way of seeing the bright side of things and others have a troublesome way of seeing the darkness. I suppose that each one, up to a point, has a real contribution to make. When we think that everything is dark to the point of blackness, the person who says, "it's brighter than you think" corrects our partial vision. And again, when we get to be complacent and think that everything is going well and there is nothing to worry about, the person who says, "it's later than you think" nudges us out of our luxurious rut.

apparently impoverishable land. That is where we came from. This is how we were born.

HOW DID WE GET ON

The next question: how did we get on. We got on quite well at first. You might even say that we were somewhat precocious to begin with. We mastered this great land - cleared it, farmed it, mined it, drained it, irrigated it; indeed, we ravished it. We weathered the climate from the tropical breezes of Florida to the long, hard winters of Maine and Minnesota. We produced remarkable leaders, quite quickly, in the North - men like Adams; in the South - men like Jefferson; and in between - men like Ben Franklin.

Later, we broke away from home - politically, not culturally. Politically we broke away from home, severed the ties, asserted our independence. And then we began to make a new world. Electric lights took the place of candles, trains took the place of stage coaches, automobiles took the place of horses, machines took the place of men. We built great cities. We conquered the continent.

Then came that difficult period (if we can think of the life of a nation in terms of the life of an individual) - the period we call adolescence. I looked up the word adolescence in the dictionary and found that it not only tried to describe what it was, but even said that in a man it begins at the age of fourteen and sometimes lasts until the age of twenty. Whatever you choose to think about the age of adolescence, it is usually apt to be an awkward age. In the life of a man it is the time when he is no longer a boy and not yet a man, and this can be a difficult time for a great many people, both boys and girls. Wasn't it Mark Twain who in looking back on his adolescent years remarked how surprised he was to see how much knowledge his own father acquired between the time that he (Mark Twain) was fourteen and nineteen.

It is almost impossible to say when our national adolescence began, but I think you can say that during the First World War we were introduced to society, society in a large way, international society, and it isn't surprising really to see as we look back at that time that we didn't quite know how always to behave. We hadn't been away from home very much, only the privileged had travelled. Most of the men who were in France and England during the First World War had never been away from Kansas or wherever they came from. It isn't surprising, together with many of our leaders, that they didn't know quite how to behave. Unfamiliar things were made fun of. I suppose this is what we're always tempted to do. And, of course, when they weren't understood by people who spoke a different language, they simply said it louder, and when they were insecure at sea, they boasted about the huge lakes in Maine or out in Minnesota. It was an awkward age for a people not yet quite sure of themselves and not used to the more sophisticated ways of people in older lands.

But by the end of the Second World War, we were through the worst part of our adolescent life. That is, we had found ourselves, had established ourselves as a nation, had lived in other countries, worked with them, fought, bled and died with them in the battle for human freedom.

WHERE ARE WE NOW The next question: where are we now? I suppose you might say that we are on top of the pile. We are the leaders of the free world and the co-leader with our friendly enemy, the Russians, of the entire world. We're on top - in numbers, in wealth, in size, in power, in technology. We didn't ask to be here, and I think it is fair to say that we didn't try to be here, but that is where we are - on the top of the pile, so to speak.

There is, I suppose, something strange about a position like this. It is the most enviable position and at the same time the most vulnerable position that any nation can be in. Everybody likes to be, or thinks he would like to be on top. Once he gets there, however, two things may happen to him: he may be dizzy and topple off, or he may get over-confident, cocky, and be knocked off. His position, therefore, is both an enviable one and a vulnerable one.

Of these two possibilities, the first, to my way of thinking, is more threatening to us at the moment. As a nation, we are getting dizzy. We are dizzy, somewhat dizzy with money, not everybody, but a great many of us - the things that money can buy, the things that money stands for, represents. ~~We are becoming a very materialistic people.~~ We are dizzy with freedom. Some of us are claiming and getting a kind of freedom from authority we have never had before, and we are not always sure how to use that freedom once we get it. We are dizzy, with few, if any, guidelines to steady us, guide us, and decisions to make from morning till night. We are dizzy with things - there are so many things to do, to learn, places to go, ~~so many things to do~~, so many ways to get there, and so much money to spend

when we arrive that we stagger as we try to stand on so great a height. Our heads reel as we look down on the place below.

Tranquilizers relieve the symptoms. But I think what we need more than a tranquilizer is a stabilizer that will cure the sickness. I know only one thing about a stabilizer, and that is that we cannot produce it ourselves. When we find it, it will be given to us. (chemically, or through our marv. technology)

The other possibility, that is, the possibility of getting cocky and being knocked off, is always present. We need to remember that no nation has been on the top very long. Great Britain - how long? Fifty years? Perhaps we should say one hundred yeards - from the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 to the First World War in 1941 - a hundred years on top. No nation has been on top very long, not even Rome.

But while we are on top, we have a chance to add to our idealism a salty dash of realism. I may be wrong on this, but as I look at the nation and try to be ob-
200 yrs. jective, it seems to me that we have been essentially romantic and idealistic. And certainly this has been a great part of our strength. I hope we have not lost it. But we have not always been realistic.

I think there is a strong streak of self-interest that runs through our people, nation and sometimes gets in the way of the fulfillment of our American dream, the fulfillment of those marvellous ideals and ideas that our founding fathers gave to us. No nation is always purely altruistic. This strong streak of self-interest, of what's in it for us, operates both within and without the borders of our land - in terms of the way we treat minority groups and treat other nations. We are not a giant Galahad going about the world seeking whom we may deliver. It is hard to believe that we would have been fighting in southeast asia for six years or more simply out of concern for the well-being of those who live there if we felt that there was no interest of our own at stake that was in need of being defended. To recognize this inevitable self-interest present in everything we do as a nation is not to deplore it, or to be cynical about it. It is to be realistic.

Another fact that I would remind you is that no man or nation can long be free and healthy without discipline and the best discipline is self-discipline. The rules by which we have been playing the game of life for the last, roughly speaking, two thousand years, have always been broken. Now they are generally being ignored. Each player seems to be making his own rules. The result is chaos. Sooner, or later, if the old rules are no longer valid, new ones must be found, generally acceptable and generally accepted, and for the most part observed by most people. Remember the law of the harvest: "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap".

One more thing, and this is it. If clothes don't make the man, neither does money. Man makes money, but money never makes the man - not a real man. Character is what makes a great man. Character is what makes a great nation.

CLOSING On this Sunday then before Thanksgiving in 1970, we as a people look back at ourselves as a nation. We are thankful that we have survived our beginning; we are thankful that we finally grew out of our delayed and prolonged adolescence; and we are thankful that we now have the opportunity to become yet more mature, and to show to the rest of the world how a nation at the top - can be idealistic, but not unrealistic - powerful, but not arrogant - rich, but not decadent.

I would close with one of the stanzas of our closing hymn, a great hymn:

"God of justice, save the people
From the clash of race and creed.
From the strife of class and faction,
Make our nation free indeed;
Keep her faith in simple manhood
Strong as when her life began,
Till it find its full fruition in
the brotherhood of man"

PRAYER O God, the maker of the stars and master of men and nations, give this nation, so richly endowed, the courage to meet the demands that are made upon it. Forgive its foolish ways and words, in better lives thy service find, in great trust thy praise.

As we remember this hour all the good things that have come our way, let us not forget the failures that might have been avoided. Help us to be realistic without being cynical, idealistic without losing touch with things as they are. We ask these things quietly now in the spirit of Jesus. Amen

ADDITIONAL SERMON NOTES:

Or, in the lines of that familiar couplet:

"Two men behind prison bars,
The one sees mud, and the other stars"

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Among them, your parents, grand-parents, great grand-parents....my parents.

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Look at the hymn book in Finnish, next to our own...

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I don't know enough about history to be able to say with any certainty that there are more people of different racial and cultural backgrounds in this land than in any other, but I shouldn't be surprised if that were the case!

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