

"THANKSGIVING - AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?"

INTRODUCTION And suddenly it's Thanksgiving, drawing us back to our roots, reminding us of who we are and what a strange and wonderful journey we have come. For a little while this coming Thursday, we'll all be Pilgrims again - feasting, toasting, marveling that the Lord has brought us through another year. We are blessed.

Were a poll to be taken, Thanksgiving would probably be voted the best-loved holiday of the year. It is so American, so cozy, so rigorously non-sectarian. It's wreathed in generosity and thankfulness. And no day is so firmly rooted in our colonial past. That bit of history that launched a billion turkeys into an infinite bog of cranberry sauce was set down by one of the Pilgrim fathers in prose that still takes the heart with its innocence:

"Our harvet being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling so we might, after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help, served the company almost a week."

This account does not mention, as Francis Dillon points out in his book, "The Pilgrims" that the Indians fattened the feast by sending five deer. A nice little extra. Three hundred years removed from that first feast of venison and Indian corn, it's good to know that some of the rugged Pilgrim spirit abides. Somewhere, in this still rich and wonderful land, the harvest is home, the wood is stacked, the preserves are down from the shelf and the storm windows are up.

Thanksgiving chastens, and restores and puts us into a proper mince pie mood for the coming of Christmas. Thanksgiving brings no tension, no obligation to bestow gifts, to sing carols, to deck the halls or send a card, or catch a bad cold to prove you are Duty's daughter.

When the harvest is home, there must be a harvest home supper. Like so many holidays, Thanksgiving rises out of something basic and profound in the very nature of man.

DEVELOPMENT But some may wonder, in these times, is Thanksgiving really that relevant? Or, is it becoming, like Christmas...secular Christmas... another obligatory feast that depresses people of conscience and fuels the bitterness of the unfed, hurting poor? The questions, at least, are relevant. 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 unblessed.

This year the unblessed may be numbered in the millions. Some have been standing long hours in the unemployment lines, living frugally and slowly losing hope. There are the unblessed who are old, and who will be dining alone in drab, cold little rooms next Thursday (not far from this Church), or holding out their thick, chipped plates for a slice of turkey at the Salvation Army.

There was much to do a couple of years ago over an editorial in one of our papers that placed Thanksgiving on the "endangered species" list. The language was blunt.

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

One would like to think that "social value" is precisely what Thanksgiving is all about, precisely what it is rich in. Is it not a time of sharing, a time of praising the Lord for His bounty, His goodness? And in our rejoicing, do we not give solemn thought to the plight of the needy, the unfed, the helpless and hungry? So goes the litany that has shaped our past holidays. But one wonders...is it still valid? There are some who claim 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 cancel it altogether on the grounds that the Pilgrims were white and Protestant and that's offensive to.....well, who the heck really cares?"

Funny reading, to be sure, but it struck me then and still does as a rather graceless conclusion to a fine essay. Re-reading it this past week, however, I am struck by its relevance - that word again - to the comments that I have been hearing and reading about the gluttony of Thanksgiving and the hypocrisy of it in a world where many are starving.

I think what is hopeful about America today is not this cool cynicism, but the lurking sense of shame over that cynicism. If only our holidays - to borrow a rhyme - could somehow recapture that first fine careless rapture. If only the inequities in our society weren't quite so glaring; if only we hadn't grown selfish growing older. There is a moral value in re-examining our extravagances, our sins of gluttony and pride. That's best done after the turkey, the corn bread, the pumpkin pie...(guilt before dinner is no spur to appetite) Admittedly, Americans like to eat first, feel guilty later.

BACK TO THE PILGRIMS

Once upon a time, reading the stories of how the Pilgrims celebrated that first Thanksgiving, I was filled with pity for their suffering. As Governor William Bradford wrote, they had crossed a vast ocean of trouble, and

"They had no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh them, no houses to repair unto, and the season was winter...besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men".

Three centuries and a half separate us from them, and here we are in our holiday season, living in a city that some say is "going down", in a country burdened with social problems and faced more and more with having to go without some things we've grown so accustomed to. Will a day of revel make us feel better? For a few hours, yes - it probably will - may the unblessed forgive us. For when the guests are met and the feast is set, all spirits rise.

I've always liked something Tom Wicker wrote about Thanksgiving:

"Clutter it as we may with indigestion and with football, it is essentially a time of the spirit when we let it be. A time of the heart - despite ourselves!"

CLOSING 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 to God, His Maker, and to then share his bread and meat, his warmth and wine - is perhaps the most unblest of all. Jesus reminds us, "Of those to whom much is given, much also is expected."

I would close to reading several sentences from President Carter's Thanksgiving Day Proclamation which is in today's NY Times:

"Like those who came before us, we come to give thanks for our singular deliverances and blessings, in a time of both danger and great promise. May we be thankful in proportion to that which we have received, trusting not in our wealth and comforts, but in the strength of our purpose, that all nations might be similarly blessed with liberty and abundance and live in peace.

I ask all Americans to give thanks...for the blessings Almighty God has bestowed upon us, and seek to be good stewards of what we have received".

PRAYER Lord, light the flame of gratitude within our hearts that in a grumbling, complaining world, our light may always shine with joy and praise. Bless our loved ones from whom this Thanksgiving we are separated by distance, but from whom we are not separated by thought, love and deep concern. Give us thankful hearts, O God. In the spirit of Christ we pray. Amen