

SINGING AND DANCING THANKS

Texts: Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:16-23

In our time there are two celebrations, both of which are inherently religious in nature, which have diminished considerably in influence and meaning. They are *Christ the King Sunday* and *Thanksgiving*.

The Feast of Christ the King was first instituted in the Roman Catholic Church in 1925, by Pope Pius XI, in a papal encyclical which sought to affirm the legitimacy of the kingship of Christ as compared and opposed to any human, worldly supremacy. The encyclical states, "Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but . . . by essence and by nature." Since that time the Feast of Christ the King, or as we Protestants have designated the celebration, Christ the King Sunday, has been commemorated on the Sunday that falls between November 20 and 26, inclusive.

Now there are many Scriptural referents that refer to the kingship of Christ, and we dutifully read them at this and other times of the year. We sing the hymns associated with this celebration, including the one which will end today's service; but the idea of *kingship* just doesn't gain a whole lot of traction in our culture for both experiential and political reasons. Even though each of us proclaimed Jesus as *Lord* and acknowledge in reading and song the kingship of Christ, these titles have lost much if not all of their inspirational meaning and practical application in the modern era.

The Thanksgiving holiday was also conceived within the context of religious piety. In 1621, following the Pilgrims' first harvest, William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth Colony, issued a proclamation that there should be a day of thanksgiving and prayer. Two years later, in 1623, during a severe drought, a similar decree ordering a day of fasting and prayer was issued; then it was changed to a day of thanksgiving because rain in fact came in the midst of their prayers. The subsequent proclamation by Governor Bradford read as follows:

"Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as He has . . . spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience; now, I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all the Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather at the meeting house, on the hill, between the hours of 9 and 12 in the day time, on Thursday, November the 29th of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and twenty-three, and the third year since the Pilgrims landed on the Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to the pastor, and render thanksgiving to the Almighty God for all His blessings."

In the first part of the 19th Century, a lady named Sarah Hale, the editor and founder of *Ladies Magazine* in Boston, began a crusade for a national day of thanksgiving. She doggedly petitioned three U.S. Presidents: Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan, to set aside such a day; her campaign succeeded in uniting 29 states to celebrate the last Thursday of November as Thanksgiving Day. Then came the national tragedy which was the Civil War. In the midst of that bloody horror, Sarah Hale caught the ear of Abraham Lincoln, asking him to honor "just one day of peace amidst the blood and the strife". And so, in 1863, President Lincoln officially proclaimed the last Thursday of November as a day set apart for the national giving of thanks

unto Almighty God. His Proclamation for a National Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer read, in part:

“We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, the many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

“Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us! It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”

The waning influence of the Church in our culture, and the slow decline of the kind of piety that generated such observances, have contributed to the marginalization of these two religious celebrations. Christ the King Sunday barely receives a mention outside the liturgical context of denominational worship, and Thanksgiving has for some time now become little more than the occasion for family gatherings around a really big meal, the official holiday gateway to the Christmas season, and the day prior to the busiest shopping day of the year.

I believe that one way to receive these celebrations which almost always occur at the same time each year (some years, like today, on the same Sunday), is to apply a different focus, an alternative way to view them. We are helped in this by St. Paul who, in his letter to the Ephesians, gives emphasis not to earthly titles, like *king* or *lord*, nor to physical or material abundance, which is often the substance of our annual Thanksgiving Day prayers, but rather upon persons. St. Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, “. . . I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.” This is certainly not a foreign concept to any of us, as we are all used to thanking God for those beloved family and friends who bless our lives with camaraderie and affection every day.

But Paul also commends to us the need for giving thanks to God *for* God and also for Jesus the Christ:

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.”

Thus, by giving thanks to God for Jesus, we have given a practical dimension to our understanding of Jesus as that one who has loved us beyond measure, redeemed us from fear, and given us a way back from the brink of death and destruction. Though we may not be moved by the title *king*, we nonetheless can understand what it means to be loved by God so deeply and completely that God chose Jesus to demonstrate that love in everything he said and did, and who thus invites our love and commitment in return, echoing the sentiment of Pope Pius XI's

encyclical: "Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but . . . by essence and by nature."

Many people feel uncomfortable with thanking God for material blessings and this or any other time of year, ill at ease with the idea that God would favor us with abundance while purposely denying similar abundance to billions of other human beings around the globe. Giving thanks for God, and giving thanks for the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, is one way we can acknowledge the importance of Jesus in our lives, while at the same time giving new meaning to a Thanksgiving holiday by removing the focus from an exclusive expression of gratitude for things to a thankful acknowledgement of our love for God and for the One we still call *Lord*.

During the Christmas holiday, we celebrate the beauty of the season not only through words and ideas, but through music and song, we sing the sacred music of the season, the hymns and carols that almost everyone knows from memory, and which excite in them the warm memories and peaceful sentiments of our commemoration of Christ's birth.

It occurs to me that Thanksgiving has similar music attached to it, recognizable and beloved tunes that we know and cherish, but don't often sing at other times of the year, music that stimulates memories of past Thanksgivings where we gathered together as families and friends to offer gratitude to the God of our faith.

Therefore, I thought it would be appropriate for us to sing a couple of verses from several of those hymns now, listening to music and words that speak to our heads and hearts as Thanksgiving approaches.

No. 555 – "Now Thank We All Our God", verses 1 and 3

No. 554 – "Let All Things Now Living", verse 1

No. 559 – "We Gather Together", verses 1 and 2

As King David met the joyful procession bringing the Ark of the Covenant, the golden box containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments, into Jerusalem, the Bible reports that the King gave no eloquent speeches, rather, he danced. Spontaneously, joyously, expressing a thanksgiving to God that needed no words.

Now, many of us would not be prepared to dance our thanksgiving, but we all know that Rev. Jessica Gregory is a liturgical dancer, and she will now express in beauty and eloquence of movement, thanksgiving to God, interpreting the words of that Psalm traditionally associated with the Thanksgiving holiday, Psalm 100. She will dance the Psalm once without words, then I will read the Psalm twice while she dances. Watch now, as well as listen for the Word of God, and give thanks:

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

AMEN.