

### ***The Blessed of Both Worlds***

In the name of him who comes down from heaven and gives his life to the world, dear friends in Christ: Not quite four hundred years ago, this nation's Pilgrim forefathers celebrated the first Thanksgiving on these New World shores. But it was hardly the first Thanksgiving. The first one, the one commanded by the Lord that we heard about in this evening's reading from Deuteronomy, was celebrated by the nation of Israel some three thousand years earlier. The Lord wanted his people to commemorate and thank him for their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and for his conducting them safely to and giving them possession of a good and spacious land richly flowing with milk and honey. So the Pilgrims didn't think Thanksgiving up. Instead, they were very consciously imitating the returning of thanks that the Lord God had required of his people Israel.

The Pilgrims did it for three reasons. First, no doubt, they did it because were very grateful. We've all read about the hardships they endured when they were first getting settled here. The fact is that being used to comparatively comfortable lives in Europe, they were woefully ill equipped and unprepared to begin a new colony in the American wilderness. They all might very well have died had it not been for the aid of some helpful Indians who taught them how to survive. That they lived long enough to see their first harvest in the New World was something of a miracle, and they knew it. Second, the Pilgrims declared a day of Thanksgiving because they understood the importance of being thankful. They knew that giving thanks to God was not for his benefit, but rather for theirs. The Lord doesn't need our thanks; but we need to be thankful because a people who lose sight of the simple truth that for everything we are, have, and need we are always, entirely, one hundred percent dependent upon the gracious heart of God who freely gives us all things—the people who forget *that* run the risk of proudly and mistakenly believing that they're self-supporting and independent. That is to say, those who don't return thanks to God are in danger of losing their faith and trust in God. They've shifted their trust to themselves – and the record has shown repeatedly that people don't make very good or reliable gods for themselves. Returning thanks keeps the relationship as it should be: The Lord above handing out gifts, and us below with our hands out to receive them.

But a third reason the Pilgrims celebrated Thanksgiving, and probably most significant of them all, was because in a very real sense they felt that they were actually reliving in their day the experience of the ancient Israelites. They saw themselves as a chosen people – a new Israel. They believed that the Lord had called them out of the Old World of spiritual darkness and religious oppression, and that by his mighty hand and guiding he had led them to these shores where they could prosper and be free to worship him in what they believed to be the only proper way. In their minds it wasn't Christian Europe they had left behind, but pagan, idol worshipping Egypt. God had delivered them from their bondage there just as he did for Israel. And he had brought them here, settled them in this untamed and spacious land, and given them their first harvest. So it only seemed natural to them that they would observe the same Thanksgiving that God had required of his ancient people. His words to his chosen people back then surely applied to his new chosen people.

The Plymouth Colony Pilgrims correctly understood that the ancient Israelites were the one people most blessed of both worlds: they alone had the one true God and his Word and proper worship on the spiritual side, and they alone had been given the broad and fruitful land of Israel as their inheritance on the earthly side. "Now", the Pilgrims said, "that's us. *We* are the most blessed of both worlds."

And I hope I don't upset anyone by saying it, but it turns out that they were just about as wrong as they could be. Why would I say that? Well, consider: life was extremely hard, short, and brutish for those early colonists. In our day we're used to an America booming with industry and prosperity. It's an America they never lived to see. No, for the most part they were continually afflicted with disease, starvation, extremes of heat and cold, poor harvests, and conflicts with Indians and Europeans from other colonies. They were often taken advantage of or betrayed outright by the captains and owners of ships that were supposed to bring them supplies, medicines, and needed tools. Yes, some few of them survived and managed to eke by; but the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey was something none of them ever experienced. It would be many

years before the New World could be described in such terms. If they had wanted blessed lives of comfort and prosperity on the earthly side of things, they would have been much better off staying in Europe.

But what about the spiritual side of the world? Weren't they especially blessed there? Well, inasmuch as they did had the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I'd have to say yes, they were blessed; but unfortunately, I'd have to tone down the enthusiasm with which I said it. You see, the Pilgrim's theology was a profoundly legalistic brand of Puritanism. It imposed a heavy burden of law upon Christians that made it very easy to lose sight of the central truth of Christ crucified for sinners, making salvation seem to depend less on Jesus' accomplished work on the cross and more on the rehabilitated behavior of the believer. The Pilgrims always had a big "if" hanging over their heads. "You're forgiven of your sins if you do better, if you amend your life, if you love God with all your soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself." There was never any sure comfort or assurance that Jesus did it all for you – trust in him. Nor did they believe in the power and assurance of God's forgiveness provided by the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. To the Pilgrims these were just more commandments to keep, not means by which God showed his grace and favor to helpless sinners. So sure, they came here to be free to practice their religion according to their conscience – but the brand of Christianity they practiced came equipped with spiritual shackles and chains.

Now, I'm not saying this to diminish in any way their courage or their achievements. We are right to admire them for stepping out in faith, for braving the unknown frontier, and for being willing to suffer for their convictions. Who can doubt that we could all use more of that same spirit today? And there's no denying that we have all benefited from their sacrifices. I mean, are we blessed recipients of the rich and bountiful land that they and others worked so hard for but in the end could only dream about what it might one day become. So I'm not knocking the Pilgrims; I'm only saying that they were wrong about being the people most blessed of both worlds.

No, I'd have to say that more accurately describes us. As citizens of this great and prosperous nation we enjoy a standard of living virtually unequalled either in history or in the rest of the world. And when you factor in things like our freedoms, our democratic system of government, our just laws, our strong defenses, our industry and technology, our institutions of higher learning, our natural wonders and resources ... well, there's no other way to say it: The Lord has certainly answered the sung prayer of the nation, "God bless America."

But that's only to look at the earthly side of life. And if we were to stop there, we'd be a lot like the people in this evening's Gospel reading who were only following Jesus for the free bread they thought he would give them to fill their empty stomachs. They – like so many of our fellow countrymen – were focused only on material things. Jesus was telling them that he came to give them so much more; but sadly, they weren't listening. Still today, most people aren't listening.

But we are listening. And it's only by the boundless grace and favor the Lord has shown to us that we are. Sometimes I think we forget or fail to appreciate just how blessed we are in the confessional Lutheran church to have been given the pure and unclouded understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is our faith. The vast majority of American Christianity is infected to varying degrees with strains of the same legalism and lack of assurance that plagued the faith of the Puritan Pilgrims. We are pretty much alone standing where we do solely and squarely on the merits of God's Son who gave his life for the sins of the world. Now, please don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that others aren't Christians or that they don't have saving faith. I'm saying that their overemphasis on post-conversion works and their failure to properly divide Law and Gospel place upon them burdens that are unnecessary and that have the potential to cause confusion, doubt, and misplaced trust in human merit rather than in Christ's. I'd also say that their misunderstanding of the sacraments robs them of the blessed assurance the Lord intends to convey to believers by these heavenly treasures. And I hasten to add here that I'm not saying that we are somehow smarter, better, or more spiritual than others for believing as we do.

What I am saying is that we have been richly and undeservedly blessed by God. And on account of it, we have more reasons to be thankful than any other people. As citizens of this grand country and as confessional Lutherans we have been given the *best* of both worlds, and so we really are the most *blessed* of both worlds. And so it's right that we stand before the Lord this evening in all humility, acknowledging him as the only source of all our material blessings and thanking him profusely for the great salvation he has freely

given us in his Son. And as part of showing the gratitude of our hearts, it's even more appropriate that we be moved by his goodness and his generosity to be willing to share the bounty we've been given with those who have less. This is true of the wealth and earthly goods we enjoy, of course, but even more so of the saving truths of Christ's Gospel that people need to hear.

May our Father in heaven who has given us so much also bless us with the gift of such truly humble and grateful hearts. And may he grant to you a blessed and happy Thanksgiving in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***