

### ***Rejoice in the Lord Always***

In the name of him who provides for all of our needs, dear friends in Christ: We are all familiar with the story of the Pilgrims and the first American Thanksgiving celebration way back in the 1620s at the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts. It may surprise you to know, however, that it wasn't until October of 1789, one hundred seventy years later, that President George Washington declared the first *National Day of Thanksgiving*. Said our first president in the official proclamation, "I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country ... and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us." Interestingly enough, the intent was that the citizens of this land spend the day in fasting and fervent prayer – quite a bit different than we observe it now, hmm? But then, maybe that's why the idea didn't catch on. All indications are that the American populace observed the day once and then promptly forgot about it.

It was some "four score" years later that President Lincoln brought Thanksgiving out of mothballs. It was October of 1863, at a time when our nation was torn apart, literally at war with itself, and during the year that has since turned out to be the bloodiest, and in terms of human life costliest, our nation has ever seen either before or since. They were sad and dreadful times, to be sure. But at Gettysburg that summer, the tide had begun to turn. By the fall of that year it had become clear that the rebellious Confederate states could not win the war. And with their fortunes in decline, the longed feared threat that foreign military forces might join the southern cause evaporated. It would take another year and a half and many more thousand lives to bring the Civil War to its end; but secure at last with the sense that the Union had been preserved and that slavery would be eliminated, President Lincoln designated the last Thursday in November to be observed once again as a Day of Thanksgiving for the Nation.

What's fascinating is that despite the horrors of the war then raging and all the hardships and sorrows that went with it, in his presidential proclamation Lincoln stressed all the good things that were continuing to happen throughout the country. He spoke of the bountiful harvests, the increase in industry, mining, trade, and education, the expanding borders of the land and its growing population, and how that with the exception of the relatively small number of places that had actually seen the ravages of war, the vast majority of the populace still lived in safe, stable, and prosperous areas. About these remarkable blessings even in the face of the worst adversity the nation had ever seen, Lincoln said this, "No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy."

And here I think it's fair to say that Lincoln captured something of what St. Paul is impressing upon us in the Epistle lesson for today where he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Certainly Paul knew something about enduring adversity. In his zeal to spread the Gospel to those who were perishing without it, he had suffered immensely. He had once been stoned and left for dead and beaten more times that he could remember. On several occasions he'd been almost torn to pieces by angry mobs. He'd been starved, impoverished, cold and without adequate clothing or shelter; he'd been shipwrecked. Even as he writes these words, he's in prison in Rome. This is the man who despite it all is telling us to

rejoice and not to be anxious about anything. Why? Because, he says, the Lord is at hand, which isn't so much a reference to Christ's second coming when we'll be set free from all the afflictions of this world (although that may be part of it); rather, he's talking about the fact that the Lord is *with* us – right here beside us – even *in* our afflictions. He's calling upon us to keep in mind the comforting presence of the Lord Jesus who is always with us in adversity to free us from fear and to help us see things positively.

This is important for us because we too are living in difficult and trying times. We are in the second year of a global pandemic that has brought death to millions and suffering and sorrow to millions more. It has destroyed innumerable small businesses and put multitudes out of work – which in turn has depressed the economy, interrupted the supply chain, and caused rampant inflation. None of this looks like it's going to get better soon. And that's just a summary of our financial woes. We've got other problems: as a nation we are deeply divided not so much on the issue of racism, which we all agree is a great evil; but rather on how best to deal with it. One side says support the nuclear family, provide better education, instill a good work ethic and racism will die on its own. The other side says eliminate law enforcement, riot and burn businesses, and give more handouts to the oppressed. There's not a lot of common ground there. This is a rift that won't be healed soon.

Then you can add to these causes for concern any number of other items; like our deepening distrust of the government and our elected politicians—regardless of their party affiliation. If you're like me, you watch the news and more often than not you're convinced that the inmates are running the asylum. Add to that the general sense that we've lost our moral compass. As a nation it seems more and more that we can't tell the difference between right and wrong – or if we can, we don't care. For goodness sake, they used to talk about a time when men were men and women were women. Now we're told we can't be certain of that anymore and that it's a form of oppression to put male or female on a baby's birth certificate. Even in the church we see these sorts of problems as long held truths are being denied or being allowed to erode away.

I'm sure that you could add your own personal apprehensions to this list, but the point is that we have ample cause for concern – concern that might lead to worry or even to despair ... were the Lord Jesus not with us in it all. But he is, and that makes all the difference.

And so Paul says don't give in to worry or anxiety. Instead, because you know that Jesus is with you, let others see your steadiness and your quiet confidence in the face of life's problems. What evil can possibly happen to you with him beside you? And the problems themselves? Hand them over to him. Let him who is almighty deal with them. For him, whatever it is, it's child's play. By prayer and supplication, Paul says, while thanking him for taking care of your concerns, let your requests be made known to God. Let the Lord know what's on your mind, what it is that's got the potential to unsettle you. And with things safely in his hands you won't have anything to worry about. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Then, with all life's big worries and seemingly insurmountable problems having been put into proper perspective – that is, tiny and insignificant in the hands of God – Paul redirects our focus. Instead of looking at the negative things, he tells us to look at what's true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable. Think about what is going right. Think about all the positive things God is doing in this world and in your life despite the problems. You'll soon see that the good the Lord is doing overwhelms and completely eclipses everything else.

What am I talking about? We got a good start on it earlier while reviewing the Apostle's Creed. We began by reciting the material things God has given and continues to give us in the creation: our bodies, souls, senses, and minds, along with everything needed to support them like food, drink, clothing, homes and so on. None of us is lacking any of these things. In fact, we have them in more abundance than most of the world's population.

Then we spoke of God's work of redemption: how the Son of God became a man for our sakes in order to purchase our release from an eternity in hell not with gold or silver, but with his precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. And how he did this to bring us into his everlasting kingdom where we will enjoy receiving his blessings forever.

And then we remembered that he does all of this for us not because we chose him; but because he chose us. Our own reason and strength were opposed to God. We were dead in sin and unable to do anything positive for ourselves. But the Holy Spirit called us to life by the Gospel. He enlightened us with his gifts so that we could receive his truth and believe it. And through the ongoing ministry of his Church he keeps us in this saving faith, he daily forgives our sins, and he promises to raise us up on the last day and give us eternal life.

Small wonder then that Paul calls upon us to join him in rejoicing. How could anyone not rejoice in view of all the good that the Lord has done and is continuing to do for us through Jesus Christ? This too is why Paul could say, "I know how to be content and completely at peace in any and all of life's circumstances." Regardless of what was going on, all he had to do was keep handing his problems over to God and keep his mind instead on the good that the Lord is doing.

The same is true of us. So then let us rejoice in the Lord who preserves our lives, who fills us with so much good, and who gives us his peace that surpasses all understanding. And thus rejoicing, now and always, let us give him our humble and heartfelt thanks, through his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***