

“Thankful People”

Christ the King Sunday/Thanksgiving Sunday/Stewardship Sunday: November 21, 2010

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Come, ye thankful people, come ...that was the first line of our opening hymn today. But what are “thankful people” like? We have all known grateful and ungrateful people. How can we tell whether people are thankful or unthankful? What are the qualities or characteristics of thankful people?

A most important clue, I think, is found in the third verse of Psalm 100. The location of this verse in the passage is telling. It is right at the center of this psalm, serving as the focus of the other four verses. The psalmist declares that central to experiencing a life of true gratitude the focus of becoming a thankful person is this: **“Know that the Lord is God. It is God who made us, and we belong to God; we are God’s people, the sheep of God’s pasture.” (v. 3).**

What verse 3 is saying is that before a person can be truly thankful ...before a person can experience the fullness of gratitude ...such a person must first know the reality and nature of God to whom gratitude fully belongs. In short, gratitude belongs first and foremost to God. It is God who created the earth and all that is in it who needs first to be thanked; it is God who sent Christ to reveal God’s love to whom we first owe gratitude. And as Christian people who celebrate the enthronement of Christ on this Christ the King Sunday, it is Jesus Christ to whom all praise, glory, honor, and thanksgiving belong.

For at least the last decade, if not longer, there seems to me to be a growing confusion about being thankful to God in our culture today. About ten years ago *Newsweek* carried an advertisement for a winery that read: “The earth gives us wonderful grapes. The grapes give us wonderful wine. The wine wins us lots of new friends. Thank you, earth.” That type of thinking is becoming more and more prevalent. Gradually but noticeably, the focus of human gratitude seems to be shifting from God to the earth, and steadily towards the genius of humanity, and sometimes merely to our friends’ actions or our own individual actions.

This will not do for the psalmist whose Lord is Yahweh ...the one true God who made us, to whom we belong, and who is enthroned on high. Nor will this do for the prophets of Old

Testament times. **“Do you not know? Have you not heard?”** Isaiah asked, and then answered: **“The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth, and no one can fathom the Lord’s understanding.”** Nor will this cultural lapse in our understanding that gratitude in the first instance belongs to God pass the evangelist’s test: **“Through him all things were made,”** wrote John in the Prologue to John’s Gospel, **“and without him nothing was made that has been made.”** Nor would it pass the apostle’s test who in Ephesians chapter 1 declares: **“Christ rules there above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and lords; Christ is above all titles of power in this world and in the next. God put all things under Christ’s feet, and gave him to the church as supreme Lord over all things.”**

All these witnesses are saying the same thing: *God in Christ is in charge, in control.* This Sunday, the last Sunday of the liturgical Christian year, is a day more than any other day that we honor Jesus as Christ the King. If ever there was a Sunday when we should sing Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus*, it is today: *King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and he shall reign forever and ever.*

So “thankful people” are, in the first place, **people who acknowledge God as Creator and Redeemer of all creation ...as Savior of the world ...as Lord of all life ...as the One from whom we came, to whom we now belong, and to whom we will all one day return to give an account of our stewardship of the gift of life.**

Second, “thankful people” are those who in the words of the psalmist **“enter God’s gates with thanksgiving, and God’s courts with praise.”** In other words, they are not only those who acknowledge God as Creator and Redeemer, but **thankful people are also those who worship God.** Whenever we approach God in worship and devotion, God asks us for our thanksgiving whether we feel like making it or not, so that we might experience the blessings it brings to us and to others. Look around you. Find that which is good and thank God for it.

Paul, writing in the Letter to the Ephesians chapter 1 reflects on the faith and love of those to whom he is writing and says, “Ever since I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks to God for you.” Applying what the apostle means to your life and mine, I think his sermon would sound something like this: “Find that which is caring and thank God and the person who is doing it. Look around you with an attitude of gratitude this week. Look inside, look outside, and think on that which is

noble and true and beautiful and express your praise for it . . . express it no matter what the bad or the ugly may be up to.”

There is an old story or fable told about a far-off land ruled by a tyrant. This despot had an ironclad grip over all parts of his kingdom, except for one frustrating area. He was unable to destroy the people’s belief in God. He summoned his counselors and put the question to them: “Where can I hide God so that the people will end up forgetting him?” One counselor suggested that God be hidden on the dark side of the moon. The proposal was debated for some time, but voted down because it was believed that one day scientists would discover a means of space travel and God would end up being found again.

Another advisor to the tyrant came up with idea of burying God beneath the depths of the ocean floor. This was voted down for basically the same reason – it was felt that scientific advancement would lead to the discovery of God even beneath the depths of the ocean floor. Finally the oldest and wisest of the counselors had a flash of insight. “I know,” he said, “why don’t we hide God where no one will ever think to look for God?” He explained, “If we hide God in the ordinary events of people’s everyday lives they’ll never find God.” And so it was done – and they say that people are still looking for God in that make-believe kingdom – even today. Or how make-believe a kingdom, we might ask, is it?

So look around you today and every Sunday as you worship and find the sacred in the ordinary and praise God for it. I believe that as the Thanksgiving holiday approaches we see God and what God does in the normal and routine parts of our lives a little more clearly than we normally do. It helps, of course, that this is Thanksgiving Sunday and that Thanksgiving decorations and the beauty of the Fall outside all foster in us a natural appreciation for God’s handiwork. Indeed, the very atmosphere at this time of year seems to encourage us to pause and to identify just how blessed we are, just how much we are the objects of God’s grace. And that’s good – because it leads us into the transforming wonder of thanksgiving in our worship.

Thanksgiving is an important part of our faith, and by this I do not mean the holiday called Thanksgiving – though that is surely a day of great blessing – but rather I mean the act of thanksgiving. Knowing the Lord our God, and developing an attitude of gratitude, the root of thanksgiving – is necessary if we are to experience the fullness of the salvation that God has planned for us through Jesus Christ. God may be recognized in spectacular meteor showers, but

God may also be hidden in the ordinary and routine events of our lives. It is our attitude of gratitude and our practice of thanksgiving that will bring God to our sight and in so doing bring to others and ourselves a better world.

“Enter the Temple of the Lord’s gates with thanksgiving,” the psalmist exhorts us. And I add, “Be grateful to God for all God’s gifts, but especially for the gift of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who is the supreme Lord over all things.”

The psalmist knew that an important part of going to the Temple to worship was to take an offering to present to the Lord. People in Old Testament times would bring their gifts as they entered the courts of the Temple with praise. As Christians, we believe that the sacrificial system of Judaism has been replaced by the offering of Jesus once-and-for-all ...the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That is why the Cross is the central symbol of our Christian faith. The Cross always points us to Christ’s self-offering on our behalf and the miracle of death and resurrection, not just for Christ, but for us, too.

Far from relieving us of the responsibility of offering gifts to God, the Cross reminds us that the saving act of Jesus Christ stirs in us a desire ...even compels us ...to respond cheerfully and generously with our gifts whenever we gather to worship. So, last, but most certainly not least, **“thankful people” are those who are *giving back to God ...and giving with generous and cheerful spirits.***

Have you noticed that people who appreciate the new life that is offered in Christ develop a spirit of generosity towards the Lord and the Lord’s work? During our Stewardship Campaign over the past few weeks, you have heard such people express their appreciation to God and to this church family for the many blessings they have received from the Lord here. Let us follow the example they have set ...let’s not leave our expression of thankfulness to chance ...let’s be intentional about it! Let’s thank God from whom all blessings flow as we bring our 2011 Estimate-of-Giving Cards forward and place them in the receptacle provided **as an act of commitment by thankful people** as we sing the hymn [song]: *Take my Life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.