

## Thanksgiving

This week's devotions focus on two separate themes, each related to Thanksgiving. Several days look at the customary biblical texts on giving thanks to God. Several others reflect on the sermon text, Matthew 5:13-16, including the notion of 'a city on a hill' and its use in American history.

### **Day 1: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Give thanks in all circumstances**

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances: for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thes 5:16-18).

The blanket, unqualified exhortations are exceptionally challenging: "be joyful *always*"; "pray *without ceasing*"; "give thanks *at all times*". Both Paul and the Thessalonians faced worse circumstances than we ever will: they endured persecution (1 Thes 1:6). So his exhortation took root in the crucible of personal experience. It is not some fluffy optimism borne of an easy life, but is a resolute realism forged in the furnaces of tough experience. If Paul could give thanks in his circumstances, we can pursue the faith to give thanks in ours.

We readily breach these commands in two separate directions. On the one hand, when life goes well, we can take it for granted and neglect to give thanks. On the other hand, when life goes poorly, we can get frustrated and complain to God. This passage, then, speaks to us in two different directions. For one, in whatever respect life is currently going well, this text – and the Thanksgiving holiday – remind us to thank God for his kindness. For the other, in whatever challenges we face, God also invites us to give thanks to him, not least, because he works for our good in all circumstances (Romans 8:28).

### **Day 2: Philippians 4:4-7 Give thanks to God always**

Paul again, and again in hard times, urges his readers to give thanks to God. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again: Rejoice! ... Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:4,6-7).

Paul wrote these words from prison (1:17), not only suffering loss of freedom, but also facing possible execution (1:20). He lingered in prison under a penal system which expected prisoners to provide for their own needs; without adequate support from outside, he was both cold and hungry (4:12). Nonetheless, he can give thanks even in such harsh

circumstances, because he has learned “the secret of being content in any and every situation” (4:12). So he rejoices, and he gives thanks, not because of his circumstances, but because of the Lord who cares for him.

Hard times are never pleasant. But they do have at least this one advantage: they provide the context for learning to give thanks to God. When times are easy, we tend to delight more in our circumstances, rather than in God. It is only when our circumstances provide no cause for delight that we can wean ourselves off the good things that God gives and learn to love God for who he is and what he has done for us in Christ

### **Day 3: 1 Timothy 4:1-4 Giving thanks for Thanksgiving**

While, as we have seen the last two days, Scripture calls us to give thanks in hard times, neither God nor Bible are all about celebrating hardship and living as ascetics. To the contrary, today’s passage explicitly rejects the notion that we should inflict hardship on ourselves in order to grow spiritually. Such teaching derives from “demons ... liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” Specifically, Paul takes aim at those who deny others the comforts and pleasures of marriage, as well as the enjoyment of particular foods. To the contrary, Paul insists, God invites us to enjoy both, and to give God thanks for them. The pleasures of marriage and food are not to be renounced in the pursuit of holiness. Instead, Scripture declares both to be holy and good, and invites us to participate in each with gratitude and prayer.

So we give God thanks at Thanksgiving, as we tuck into the feast with family and friends. God created both food and family/friendship for us to enjoy, and so we give him thanks for his generosity not only in salvation, but also in the smaller pleasures of daily life.

### **Day 4: Matthew 5:13-16 A city on a hill: Jesus’ point**

Matthew 5:11-16 presupposes that Christian community will share two characteristics: it will be different from the surrounding world; at the same time, it will continue to exist within that world (rather than withdrawing from it).

Salt is useful only so long as it brings a distinctive taste to food; if ever that distinct taste washes away, it is no use for anything. Light is necessary only in the presence of darkness, and is useful only so long as it remains there. Sometimes Christian distinctiveness brings rejection or persecution (5:11-12). Other times, it provides opportunity to make a difference, to present the Father to the surrounding world, and to influence the world for Christ (5:13,14-16).

So despite the potential for misunderstanding or the reality of occasional rejection, as a Christian community – and as individual believers – we continue to seek opportunities to engage our world, our neighbors, and our colleagues. We live among them so that we can reveal God to them, not just in our words, but especially in our deeds.

#### **Day 5: Matthew 5:13-16 A city on a hill: not American exceptionalism**

Given the influence of Christianity on American history and culture, and the widespread – if vague – respect for Jesus, inevitably he and his teaching will be co-opted by politicians seeking to make a point or to gain some advantage. In recent history, President John Kennedy invoked the notion that America is ‘a city on a hill’, a unique country, called to model political ideals of freedom and democracy for the rest of the world to follow. President Reagan developed this idea into a core theme of his political rhetoric: of all nations, America is uniquely blessed by God, modeling political freedom, social harmony, economic prosperity, and social inclusion. America is, he asserted, the world’s leading nation, and a role model for all other countries.

This is idolatry. For all its positive qualities, America is not ‘exceptional’ or unique. It is not a shining example for other nations to follow. Some of what our country does and is legitimately serves as a model for the rest of the world; some of what our country does and represents instead serves as a negative role model. However all that turns out, God does not choose favorites among nations or empires. More importantly, Jesus was not speaking about political entities at all, but about his Church, the collective people of God.

#### **Day 6: Matthew 5:13-16 A city on a hill: Christian distinctive**

While we rightly reject the political doctrine of American exceptionalism, we do well to embrace Jesus’ actual intent, of Christian distinctive.

Our weaknesses and failings rightly breed modesty; exceptionalism is too grandiose a claim to sustain. Yet as a Christian community and as Christian individuals we should at least be able to sustain a basic distinctive. That has little to do with swearing less or going to church more, and much to do with good deeds: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” At the same time, those good deeds must be accompanied by appropriate words of testimony, so that our deeds reflect less upon us and more upon our God. The goal is not that people see our good deeds and conclude that we

are a nice group of people who help others, but that they see evidence of God at work in us, and hear enough from us to know that it is God at work in us.

We seek to make a difference, not just in word but also in deed, nor just in deed but also in word, so that our actions prompt our world to honor God.