

THANKSGIVING SUNDAY, CHRIST THE KING, INGATHERING

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of your God, you shall make this response before your God: "God brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O God, have given me." You shall set it down before your God and bow down before your God. Then you...shall celebrate with all the bounty that your God has given to you and to your house. Deuteronomy 26:5 ff

Some of you have met my friend John Gibson, who was visiting here from New York 10 days ago. One day we took a trip up to Salem to visit the Peabody Essex Museum and the exhibit from China's Forbidden City. John is a native of Arkansas, and whenever he visits New England he comments on our very different landscapes.

On the way up, we talked about how the country had been when the Pilgrims arrived: all forest and rock, snow and cold and unfathomable native peoples. *What were they thinking?* John and I asked ourselves. *What possessed them to travel so far, to brave such peril, so much unknown, such forbidding territory? What did they want?*

Well, they wanted freedom. Religious freedom, freedom from persecution, freedom to worship God as they were moved by the Spirit to do. When the Mayflower first made landfall, William Bradford records in his History of Plymouth Plantation, *Being thus arrived in a good harbor, and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the fast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element.*

Miseries therof is right! But their instinct was to give thanks and praise to God. And as we all remember from our history lessons, after their first harvest, the colonists of the Plymouth Plantation held a celebration of food and feasting in the fall of 1621. Indian chiefs Massasoit, Squanto and Samoset joined in the celebration with ninety of their men in the three-day event.

Thanks and praise and celebration. Despite it all: the miserable voyage, the rocky shores and freezing weather and dark forests filled with alien peoples, that's what they did, that was their impulse: to pray and feast and give thanks for all God's blessings.

I invited John to visit our vestry meeting: not everybody's idea of a vacation activity. But he is on the vestry of his parish in New York, and he was curious, as he said, "to observe a *functional* vestry." His observation afterwards was "I was struck and amazed by the trust you all have with one another. So relaxed, so much laughter, such harmonious decision-making! People asking all the right questions. Such efficiency! All that couldn't happen without the trust."

I feel that way myself about our vestry meetings. But it was very gratifying to hear all this affirmation from a visitor, and one who is all-too-familiar with less fulfilling vestry experiences. I give thanks regularly for the dedicated and talented leadership this parish is blessed with.

And for the previous two Sundays I, with many of the rest of you, have attended the luncheons where people spoke about their participation in various of our activities here at St. John's. Georgia Buck, who was leading the discussions, would ask the speakers why they were moved to contribute so much time, talent, and treasure. Several of them teared up as they spoke of the fulfillment they get from their membership and leadership at St. John's. And I teared up too.

And sometimes, during the presentations, I reviewed in my mind all the folks who have filled leadership roles in the past: wardens and vestry members, altar guild and altar ministers, buildings and grounds, choir, outreach, pastoral care, church school. I've been here so long that I can remember dozens of such committed faithful folk, many of whom have moved on in their lives, and to other faith communities, many of whom are with us still. The Saints of St. John's.

And then so many in the hundred-plus years before I came: those saints I didn't know, but who founded St John's and kept the Spirit alive and well here through hard times and joyous ones, through two world wars and the Great Depression; who met Sunday after Sunday to give thanks and praise to God for God's mercy and bounty, and who met at so many other occasions, doubtless, to carry out God's work in this parish and in this community.

As all these saints, known and unknown, passed through my mind and heart, and as I listened to the testimonies of our current leaders, I was filled to overflowing with awe and gratitude.

And I said to the luncheon groups meeting this month. *They founded and preserved this place for us. And we are here now. It's up to us. We are it.*

None of us has braved fearsome seas, literally, to arrive here at St. John's. But many of us have braved other barriers: the wounds we bear from our religious upbringing, our suspicion of the Church because of her all-too-frequent condemnation of difference, our unfamiliarity with religious practice or with the Anglican tradition in particular. But here we are.

And many of you have spoken to me of your gratitude and relief at finding this place of worship, this sanctuary, this community where you feel free to be yourselves, to become full members of a faith community where you are not judged or guilt-tripped.

And I, too, have found great freedom in this place. I have been free to do the advocacy work for which I have such an abiding passion, with your support and help. I have been free to share my life struggles with you from this pulpit, and have heard frequently that my example of openness frees you to find forgiveness and peace and courage within yourselves. I have been blessed beyond imagining.

So perhaps we are not, my dear friends, so entirely different from those earliest Pilgrims who settled on these shores. We, too, have voyaged in search of religious freedom, and have found a home.

I find as I get older and, I hope, more mature spiritually, I am more and more often moved into a place of gratitude. I'll never be a Pollyanna, and I probably won't ever lose my critical eye or my occasionally sharp tongue and sharp edges. But these attributes are more balanced these days, if not outweighed, by my growing understanding and appreciation that I am deeply, deeply blessed. As are we all. I am more and more aware that all I have, and all I am, is from God, and that all I give is a giving back in service to God's love and hope and promise.

And so, my dear friends, as we prepare to make our commitment to St John's for the coming year, and as we prepare as well to celebrate with our families and friends this Thanksgiving, let us truly remember and give praise for all that God, in God's great bounty, has given us.

Alleluia! Amen.