The Art of Giving Thanks

Sermon

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Oh give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good and His mercy endureth forever.” These are familiar words. They are the opening verse of the 118th Psalm, a song of joy and thanksgiving sung in the temple of Jerusalem in praise of God’s goodness to the nation.

For us, who live in the 20th Century, is there still sense in giving thanks to God? For us who are so close to the evidences of misery and of man’s cruel struggle for existence, is there perhaps some mockery in giving thanks? Was it more in keeping with the spirit of the Pilgrim fathers to give thanks, than with the spirit of their descendants three centuries later? Can we who live in an era of two devastating world wars, and who spend our days in anxiety lest there be a third, really give thanks? Or does it make more sense to believe that the God of our fathers has nothing more to do with this world?

It may be, as many learned minds have suggested, that this world has outgrown God. From many sides one has heard that mankind is held back by the lag of his social institutions; that his progress in science and industry has moved forward so rapidly that the accumulated power now in man’s hands threatens to destroy him. Blame for this possible destruction, some keen observers declare, rests on the backwardness of human institutions. These institutions—the family, the school, the church, and the very forms of government—they say, must be improved or revised to meet changing conditions. In a thought-provoking speech, Winston Churchill called this century of ours “the terrible twentieth.”

Has Modern Man Lost his Moral and Spiritual Foundations? Has he been cut loose from an ancient heritage which steadied him in time of adversity? Maybe the homeless refugee and the displaced person symbolize the nature of modern man himself, lost and uprooted in an unfriendly universe. Even those who have not yet experienced great physical privation or profound loss have long been gripped by an unmistakable sense of drifting.

Some years ago a poet summed up this rootlessness of modern man when he said, “Men are homesick in their homes and strangers under the sun, and they lay their head in a foreign land whenever day is done.”

This startling fact points to a forgotten factor in the life of our time. This factor is God. He is the God to whom that hardy little Pilgrim band gave thanks. And what had He given them? He had given them a divine discontent with things as they are. He had given them a safe journey away from the homes that they had loved so well. He had given them hardship in a new world about which they knew little. He had given them strangers for neighbors who did not speak their language. He had given them loneliness and anxiety. And to some he had given sickness and even sudden death. Yet they gave thanks.

For He had also given them new life with each rising sun. He had given them resourcefulness and courageous faith by which they rose above the hardships that strike men low. And He had given them the freedom to worship God as their conscience and His living word led them.

Was this worth the risk of life and all that one possessed? These men and women thought it was. What they did, gave spirit to an entire colony which followed after them and grew. The first historian of Massachusetts Bay Colony surveyed these early years and saw that progress had been made, not by men alone, but with the help of God. In the words of Governor Bradford: “Out of small beginnings, greater things have been produced by His hand who made all things of nothing and gives being to all things that are.”

Today we are not a small band of Pilgrims. We are a mighty nation of 150,000,000. If we keep history in perspective, and if we sense the courage of those early pioneers in the new world, should we in this age become fainthearted? Dare we become ungrateful? In spite of war, and in spite of the calculated or unwitting evil in man, that has unleashed hell across this world, we still have reason for giving thanks. God is and remains the giver of every good and perfect gift; the gift of truth, love, beauty, home, friends and the continuing freedom to worship Him. We may turn our back on God, yet He does not forsake us. We may say that the world has outgrown the God of our fathers, but He comes back again and again, through friends, through hardship, through overwhelming responsibilities.

We may be like children who momentarily exult that they can get along without parents but then discover that it is their parents who sustain life and give deepest meaning to human relationships. So it is with God who gives meaning to our lives individually and collectively, when we let Him come to us. Without Him we grope and seek a way. With Him we walk because we know the way.

So there is an art in giving thanks. To this art one dedicates his talents, his skills, his being, his passion to convey a message. Yet arts and skills have been lost. Even the art of giving thanks may become a lost art. Among people to whom God is not a living
citizens of heaven. Perhaps it will always remain easier to complain than to give thanks. Perhaps for the great mass of people life will continue as an existence in the shadows. Perhaps, for those who with design seek to eradicate our faith in God, the very word thanksgiving may one day be forgotten.

But there will always be some to whom the meaning of this word will remain fresh and living. For in this word God approaches man and saves him from destruction and death for the building of a better world. And in giving thanks we show that we have caught the meaning of our relation to Him; that we have grasped the truth of His son Jesus Christ for our individual, our community, our national, and our international life.

If, as a nation, we today seek to do His will and to trust Him — as the Pilgrims did in their day — He will give us the wisdom and the way through the complexities of our time. And He will show us how not to live for ourselves alone, but how to serve our fellowmen.

In a passage of unusual challenge, St. Paul writes to his young co-worker Timothy:

"I exhort therefore... that supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings be made for all men; for kings and all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who would have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, Himself a man, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all." I Tim. 2:1-6

Therefore let us give thanks unto the Lord for He is good and His mercy endureth forever. +END

General Ganeval Honored
For Service as Berlin Commandant

General de Division Jean Ganeval was presented the Legion of Merit in the degree of Commander by US High Commissioner John J. McCloy at a ceremony in Napoleon Barracks, Berlin-Tegel, Dec. 7. The citation accompanying the award read as follows:

"General of Division Jean X. Ganeval performed exceptionally meritorious service on behalf of the Allies and in the cause of democracy while serving as commandant of the French Sector, Berlin, from October 1946 to June 1950. He co-operated closely with the representatives of the other Occupying Powers in administering the city of Berlin and showed great strength of character and courage in resisting the encroachments of Communist elements in the Western sectors of the city.

"He worked loyally and effectively with his US and British colleagues in assuring the freedom of the West Berliners, in restoring the economic life in the city, and in organizing the security forces to meet the frequent Communist threats which developed in the city. General Ganeval's leadership was particularly outstanding during the period of the blockade and in the preparation and execution of Allied plans relating to the threatened Communist putsch on May 28, 1950, at Whitsun."

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