

Oct. 8 (Thanksgiving Sunday) Dt.8:7-18 2Cor.9:6-15 Lk.17:11-19

Let us pray: Generous God, you blessed us with the good earth filled with your bounty and your goodness. As we inherit and enjoy them, give us thankful and generous hearts, that we may honor gifts from you by giving you thanks and praises especially by sharing with all around us to the glory of your name. Amen.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving Sunday today, I noted with interest a contrasting note as advice from Moses to the ancient Israelites from our First Reading today: ‘... the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and under-ground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vine and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper . . . Do not say to yourself, ‘my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.’

I find it intriguing to note that this ‘good land’ may actually lead to pride which in turn makes one forget about God and hence forgetfulness about God leads one to the wrong path away from life and so one moves towards death; much more dangerous than, for example, for the Israelites to stay in Egypt to suffer from slavery there. For then at least one would be humble and therefore won’t forget about God. Yes, it’s an intriguing paradox because it’s a divine mystery not only applicable to the Israelites in exodus but is also the living truth in our contemporary world in our midst.

We, living in this good land of Canada, basically lack very little materially, compared with those living in third world countries. True, like the general universal trend today, the gap between the wealthy and the poor is increasing, but at least we have some basic system to try to minimize the unnecessary deprivation of those suffering from extreme poverty. Yet it is not hard for us to realize that majority of Canadians view this phenomenon as human or national achievements: corporately and individually, like how Moses said: ‘the might of our own hands have got us to this state’, thus forgetting the moral value, the legal, educational and social systems are all built from western civilization originally being rooted in, and highly influenced by, Christian ethics and values. That’s what Moses reminded us ‘it is the Lord God who gives you power to get such wealth of wellness’. The outcome? Without looking upon God with gratitude, the goodness we used to live in are gradually disintegrating and fading. We have incidents like a downtown east side low-cost ‘hotel’ being ordered by the City to be evaluated for its sub-standard, hazardous to health living conditions, or like homeless people occupying unbuilt

plots of land to make it into a ‘tent city’, or tenting in parks overnight. Meanwhile, we see the fast-moving face of cities in Greater Vancouver with condominium and modern big houses replacing modest single-houses, with ever-escalating real estate prices, but also with increasing vacancy rates. We also see year-after-year extreme weather, e.g. those igniting the B. C. wildfire causing evacuations and loss of people’s homes and properties. We also see the increase of crime rates over this once peaceful, law-abiding good land. Are these phenomena mere co-incidence with decline of church-attendance rate and the ever-increasing number of people relying on themselves in their daily acts and decisions with atheistic world-view, trusting more on technological development than the ancient call of conscience?

Well, most people are celebrating Thanksgiving this long weekend, especially as a holiday. Many are celebrating without reference to any gratitude to God, though some of them still won’t forget to count their blessings and are willing to share some of the blessings they received with those who need a little help on their way. Yet how deeply will we relate our sharing with others to the gratitude we have towards God, like St. Paul’s rationale elucidated in our Second Reading today? Let’s read about that briefly again.

‘God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. . . He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God . . .’

Won’t we be surprised by Paul’s rationale of giving the cycle of blessing loop after loop? – God’s bestowal of blessing on us is God’s means of bestowing blessing on others in need, and then God’s bestowal of blessing on others through us will instil gratitude in us, and obviously that cycle of blessing keep repeating again.

To this loop-after-loop cycle of blessing St. Paul calls it ‘the surpassing grace of God that he has given to (the Corinthians) and St. Paul concludes his depiction with his own gratitude to God: ‘Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!’ Isn’t it amazing to find that St. Paul sees this ministry of the Corinthians helping and sharing with the believers in Jerusalem for famine-relief as ‘a ministry of praise’, in addition to its being ‘a ministry of righteousness and compassion’?

So our first two readings on this Thanksgiving Sunday give us something special to contemplate about ‘thanksgiving’, something we seldom associate with

‘thanksgiving’. That’s right – we probably seldom think about thanksgiving as a loop-after-loop cycle of blessing, starting with blessing to instil gratitude in action to lead back to another cycle of blessing and thanksgiving. Likewise, we seldom think about thanksgiving given birth by humble enjoyment of blessing is God’s wise ordination for proper divine-human relationship. Do we ever envisage the key to keep inheriting and living into God’s blessings for us is to gratefully take it and, in our gratitude, we are so mindful of such precious gift as to share it with others who haven’t got it?

It’s like a wonderful story I watched not too long ago in early September. It’s on the second day after the young pre-school kids started their new semester or even started going to school. Usually some of the new kids will weep a bit, either for missing their parents or for having to adjust to a totally new environment. Yet on that day it’s somewhat usual. A kid cried and wailed for almost 20 minutes non-stop, asking for ‘mommy’ all the time. The teachers actually started phoning his parents to come by to help the child calm down. In the meantime, the teachers tried to get the rest of the young kids away from this big crying baby, probably for fear of unnecessary contiguous emotional out-burst from the other kids who were keeping calm, while a teacher was attending to the wailing kid. Then suddenly out of the blue, a little girl moved from the ‘contained crowd’ towards the crying boy, extending her hand to hold the little boy’s hand and that magically stopped his wailing, something which the teachers had been trying to do for 20 minutes. Then the little boy walked as his hand was held by the little girl’s and they walked back to join other little kids as a crowd. At that point the boy’s father arrived, only to find that his boy was already joining other kids to play in the playground, and he was relieved for as soon as he left 20 minutes ago, the boy had since been crying.

To me that’s an amazing parable that had been lived out by the little girl. I don’t know whether she’s a new student or a return student. And I had a hunch that she didn’t know this boy before he came as a new student. The fact that she left the by-standing crowd to reach out to the crying boy showed that she actually enjoyed being with other children in the new school year, wanting to invite the boy to leave behind his fear to join the pleasure of school life. In our case, she’s happy and thankful that she can have fun in school and so she desires to share that joy and thankfulness with someone who hadn’t yet appreciate such a gift. In her reaching out to the crying boy, she must be even happier in her new school life after the summer. I find it amazing that little kids grasp such truth without theologizing or developing a philosophy about thankfully sharing fun at pre-school.

We know well that as we move away from early childhood days, we gradually forget those natural insights. St. Paul found that not every faith community chose to live that out. Jesus found that only one out of ten cleansed lepers came back to say ‘thankyou’ and praised God. For that matter, we all know that it’s a big deal to be cleansed from leprosy so that one could no longer live as an outcast in society but regained normal life. Many of us remember how grateful that Aramaic Chief Commander Naaman in the Old Testament had been to God, and to the prophet Elisha, when he found that his leprosy was gone after doing what Elisha told him to do. For that matter, his entire worldview was changed from despising the God whom Israelites worshipped to proclaiming, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel’ and he offered a present to Elisha whom at one point of time he howled at him, saying that he won’t do what Elisha told him to.

That sort of brief comparison gives us a better insight into Jesus’ disappointment in seeing only a Samaritan returning to give thanks while the other nine, presumably Jews, did not show up, so much so that he said, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ And Jesus decided that only the one who returned to give thanks could be ‘made well’ – i.e. physically, emotionally and spiritually, in addition to being healed from leprosy.

Today as we gather here to celebrate Thanksgiving Sunday, I am especially thankful for the Holy Spirit’s giving us inspiration to go deeper in our appreciation of thanksgiving as the life-style that God calls us to live out in all facets of our lives. If that little 3-year-old girl can live it out without pondering upon, or worrying about, ‘what if she in thankful enjoyment of her new school life and extend a friendly hand to someone who hasn’t yet tasted it’, there is no reason we can’t be the contemporary Corinthian believers turning our thanksgiving into sharing God’s gifts for us with those in need. There is no reason that we can’t be the Samaritan ex-leper to return and give praise to God. There is no reason that we forget about God’s provisions to us and say that we wrought them by ourselves.

Let us pray again: Generous God, you blessed us with the good earth filled with your bounty and your goodness. As we inherit and enjoy them, give us thankful and generous hearts, that we may honor gifts from you by giving you thanks and praises especially by sharing with all around us to the glory of your name. Amen.