

Oct. 7 (Thanksgiving Sunday) Joel2:21-27 Ps.126 1Tim.2:1-7 Mt.6:25-33

Let us pray: Generous God, you created us and granted us all blessings, in times good and bad. Grant us faith to see your bounty and goodness, so that we can live gladly with generous hearts, giving thanks for the depth of your love and mercy, and praise you in all times and places. Amen.

Happy Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving in our parish is a big day, perhaps not so much in the sense of celebrating Christmas and Easter with our parish meals, but Thanksgiving Sunday occupies a unique highlight in our year as it always follows our time (of three Sundays) contemplating our divine-human relationship in terms of our gratitude to God, perhaps not unlike how we recited from Psalm 126 today: 'The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.'

Nevertheless, such simplistic way of reading Psalm 126 takes it out of context, without taking into account that it's a song of thanksgiving after the dark years, as we also recited from the same psalm: 'When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy . . . May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy carrying their sheaths.'

Yes, life (individual and corporates ones alike), all have their flows and ebbs, sweet times and challenging hours. Yet the Israelites (as evidenced in Scriptural readings) are highly resilient as they pose their trust in God, even in their dark hours (like the years of exile), trusting that God will always honor the divine promise of restoration. So inevitably their hearts can easily be filled with gratitude, especially when they see the realization of the promised restoration. It's no mere co-incidence that Jewish people as inheritors of gratitude-filled relationship with God, are highly resilient, even though they constantly face national disasters, including the recent history of Holocaust. Such gratitude to, and trust in, God brings not only resiliency, but also positive attitude to keep going despite what the eyes of flesh cannot see, counting rather on what the eyes of faith can see. Hence, no matter what, they keep 'going out (despite weeping), bearing the seed for sowing' and 'sowing in tears' against all odds.

If we can grasp that 'thankfulness and faith' is their source of motivation and sustenance for resiliency, all of us here can fetch much better in our earthly journey. In fact, over the 2,000 years of history on Christianity, we often see our ancestors in faith tap into 'gratitude and faith' as their corner-stone for being used by God to bring about church revivals. Once again, we can see another example from the Israelites in our First Reading today.

There, once again, after years of famine (i.e. what we heard from the passage as the years when the Lord sent locust and grasshopper to destroy the harvest), God is bringing them back restoration. Let's listen to portion of the reading again: 'do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! Do not fear, you animals

of the field, for the pasture of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing-floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. . . You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God . . . You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I the Lord, am your God . . . And my people shall never again be put to shame.'

Yes, the Israelites can count on God's graciousness to them, whether after political or natural turmoil or disasters. It's this 'certainty in their uncertain life' which shaped their posture of gratitude in life toward God, and then helped to sharpen their inner-eyes to see and count on God's grace, in times good and bad. Compared with our days of ultra-fast pace, constant multi-tasking and multi-level sensual impacts hitting us like tidal waves from all directions, most of us can hardly have time to pause, contemplate or to look back, not to mention to have small or intimate talks with God. Operating in high mobility mode, it's not easy for us to see with our inner eyes to replace our fleshy perceptions.

Not too long ago, a parishioner said to me: 'Sometimes when all news you get are bad news, it's hard to see beyond them to find the 'silver-lining' of the dark clouds.' I nodded to signify my appreciation of what she's talking about, but then I added, 'try look for the silver-lining from Jesus' promise that he won't leave us behind as orphans, or, from that poem on 'Footprints in the Sand' when in that dream the author Margaret Fishback Powers talks about the only one set of footprints during the lowest and saddest times of her life when she walked with Christ along the beach, and when she wondered why, she heard Jesus whispered to her, 'My precious child, I love you and will never leave you never, ever, during your trials and testing. When you saw only one set of footprints it was then that I carried you.' How can we not thankfully see silver-lining as love from on high?

Well, if this is just as a priest's answer to a parishioner, it'll carry a lot less weight than how she knew that I had just gone through the crucible of fire as a cancer patient, and was then waiting for more fiery trials to come up. Such witnessing of mine from the bottom of my heart in gratitude is in a way similar to what we heard St. Paul said in our Second Reading today to Timothy: ' . . . God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved . . . For . . . Christ Jesus . . . who gave himself a ransom for all . . .'. Such our Savior who gave himself for us on the cross, how won't he prepare silver-lining for each dark cloud over our heads?

Yet it's not hard to envisage that Christ Jesus does appreciate our human inclination to worry when all that we see are dark-clouds. Knowing such is also the major cause for our difficulty in closely abiding in God, Jesus gave his disciples a special lesson in today's Gospel Reading. There, Jesus said: 'No one can serve two masters . . . Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life . . . or about your body . . . if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven,

will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith? Therefore do not worry . . . but strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

It's so true – any moment when we cast our minds on anything above our devotion to God, even though we fully understand that worry can't even 'add a single hour to our span of life', we'll start worrying. Why? Because by putting our priority on things above God, we automatically switch to trying our best to navigate or preserve the attainment or keeping of such things, and then fully realizing that we as humans have limited ability, so we start to worry. We find it hard to entrust the matter to God, since we consciously or subconsciously place that matter above God in our priorities in life. Yet when we rely on our own efforts, we know well that however brilliant is our navigation or arrangement, there's always something which we miscalculate, and we can never control all circumstantial factors. It's only when we entrust everything onto God's hands that we gladly take whatever God gives or permits, and live freely to enjoy.

Yesterday my husband and I celebrated our 6th wedding anniversary. Six years ago, Oct. 6 also fell on a Saturday before Thanksgiving Sunday. Needless to say, picking such a day for our wedding carried its special meaning for us. Yet at that point of time, I could never foresee that within such short period of six years, my husband had a stroke almost three years ago, and I had cancer recently. However, taking another angle, both stroke and cancer are prevalent causes for severe illness or even death, so what's the surprise if we two also got caught?

With a more objective perspective to our so-called plights, both my husband and I can continue to celebrate our marriage with whole-hearted thanksgiving. Ever since his stroke, John has been in the habit of telling or re-iterating to his family and friends alike that if I hadn't flown back-east to support him immediately when his left-side had been totally hampered so that he couldn't even stand up by himself, he would never been able to recover to his current state of wellness. And now I can tell the same story that if I had to attend by myself (i.e. without John's company) all those gruesome (though helpful) medical tests and biopsies, go for surgery, wait for outcomes, hanging on in frailty for recovery and for further treatment, the path must be much harder to tread. How could I foresee that God gave me a life-companion in my ripe age, not for procreation, but simply to accompany me to fight the inevitable upon aging? As I think about that, our vow of 'taking you to be my spouse, to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, for the rest of our lives' is invaluable: together we fly with a pair of wings, in life and in ministry!

Let us pray again: Generous God, you created us and granted us all blessings, in times good and bad. Grant us faith to see your bounty and goodness, so that we can live gladly with generous hearts, giving thanks for the depth of your love and mercy, and praise you in all times and places. Amen.