

Oct. 13 (Thanksgiving Sunday) Deut.26:1-11 Phil.4:4-9 Jn.6:25-35

Let us pray: Generous God of love, you led us into your land of milk and honey and gave us bountiful harvesting. Accept our joyous praises and heart-felt gratitude, so that in our thanksgiving to you we may offer the abundance of our first-fruits in love initiated by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to share your gifts of love, justice and compassion to our loved ones and neighbors. Amen.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving Sunday today, it inevitably reminds me that whenever we are giving thanks to God, it comes with our recalling God's blessings for us in life (in both times good and bad alike), just like how we heard from our First Reading today, with the Israelites observing Moses' instructions to them to recite their blessings as they offered up first fruits as some of the first harvest from the land of milk and honey which God gave them. There, they would say, 'a wandering Aramean was my ancestor, he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us . . . we cried to the Lord . . . (he) heard our voice and saw our . . . oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt . . . with power . . . and signs and wonders; and he 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 fruits of the ground that you, O Lord, have given us.'

Yes, in a way, is experienced by us all in our roller-coaster journey in life, as we experience blessings from on high – blessing of milk and honey in the land which God settles us in, even when we don't even know what to expect or what to ask. Like the people of God after final entry into the Promised Land in a miraculous way, they thought about their ancestor from afar, wandering as an Aramean and eventually settling down in Egypt and prospered into the great nation, mighty and populous. Yet before the Israelites could afford time to celebrate fully as their new settlement in Egypt, they eventually experienced hardship, affliction and oppression there. And then the plights got turned into blessing of final entry into the Promised Land after 40 years' wandering in the wilderness. It's not only a land of their own – no longer a wandering alien in Aram nor an enslaved second-class in Egypt. This land promised by God (to which they entered) was also a land with plenteous pastures so that there won't be lack of milk to pair up with their daily food of bread. What's even more amazing is that it's also a land with wonderfully weaved weather conditions and vegetation to facilitate bees to work their way through* so that honey won't be lacking year after year.

[an idea put forward by Margaret Feinberg in her book 'Scouting the Divine']*

How can the Israelites forget to offer their first fruits and tithes as their way of thanking God? And how about our personal and community journey stories prodding us to say ‘thank you’ to God today? Each of us will surely have a deeper memory for our personal journey stories, even just for the past year. Some of you may remember how I wrote in last year’s ‘Thanksgiving Musing’ as insert to our Thanksgiving Sunday bulletin on God’s grace and provision, as I then just came back to work after about three months’ on-and-off medical leave following my diagnosis of cancer in May. I obviously didn’t expect any substantial challenge this year close to last year’s magnitude.

Well, that expectation wasn’t unrealistic. So we had some smooth sail as we then started the busier yearly routine of Stewardship Sundays and Thanksgiving Sunday and then Advent and Christmas. We even managed to finish our parish photograph booklet project in December and January as we moved into our 72nd anniversary of the parish! But then throughout March to Sept. the parish and I experienced challenging rhythms in life, as our secretary had to take two periods of medical leave, firstly for his cancer treatment and then for his stroke. Meanwhile my mother who used to be full of energy and enthusiasms despite in her nineties, had succumbed to bouts of infection so as to fight for her health and her life, firstly for pneumonia and then for UTI. I find it miraculous for me to pile on my usual load the secretary’s duties and be my mom’s major care-giver. In this past half year and a bit, I woke up each morning, not quite sure whether I would be able to hang on with my duties till I closed my eyes at night – sometimes not necessarily in bed since from time to time I simply slept on the floor outside my mom’s bedroom in case if she fell or needed help but had no energy to summon help. Yet our generous God threw in more bonus for our cause of gratitude: in the midst of this super-full work-load, God said: ‘with me you people can do it’ - and so we then had two baptisms: an adult was baptised in mid-July at our Service in Mandarin and a baby was baptised in late August at our Service in English. What a joyous surprise!

I fully trust that God’s mercy and grace came not only for me, but all the more for my mother, for our secretary and for all of us. God knew full well that we needed milk and honey, so to speak, in the Promised Land which God had prepared for us, though it might be draped as hardship and plight so that sometimes we might not see the wonderful pasture and superb weaving of extraordinary weather conditions and vegetation which God had prepared for our bee-angels to produce honey for us. For that matter, I did see God sending volunteer-angels to help light my load. How can I forget to offer my thanksgiving to God and share my joy and praises to God with you here? Well, more than mere co-incidence, our Archbishop in her recent address to the clergy mentioned that her illness ending with hospitalization

for checking over the summer gave her tremendous sense of gratitude to God. So here, as a symbolic act, I'm placing in front of the altar our fruits-offering for Thanksgiving these (over 150) apples from the apple tree at my back-yard, as well as some home-grown organic pumpkin and potatoes (given to me by my friend). As you may easily appreciate, I didn't have time to water my apple-tree, not to mention giving it any plant-food. That abundant harvest is all God's provisions, and to God I give glory and thanksgiving, I guess not dissimilar to how the Israelites offered their first fruits as thanksgiving offering.

This is also not dissimilar to St. Paul's exhortations which we heard from our Second Reading today: '. . . Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. . . Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing (them) . . . and the God of peace will be with you.'

It's so true. When one's heart is filled with thanksgiving, one won't worry any more but be ready to welcome whatever we may have to embrace. Like I said just now, I wasn't even sure whether I could keep going and hung on – but who cares: I knew full well God was the only one in control, and God cares more for the parish and in fact for my mom than I can. So with no worry or fear, I had all the peace in mind and in heart I needed for onward-moving, to do what's needed for the day. So I could do whatever is true, honorable, just, pure or commendable with gentleness and excellence, with the God of peace being with us all these six to seven months.

This 'little secret' linking thanksgiving to peace and strength for navigation of ministries actually shouldn't surprise us. In fact, we heard it from Jesus' saying in today's Gospel Reading. There, Jesus showed dismay for people's coming to look for further miracles for bread, not as a response of their seeing Jesus' feeding 5,000 with five loaves and two fish the day before. He said to them: 'do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you'. Jesus' comment obviously got the crowd's attention and so they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?'

Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' Exactly! What links thanksgiving to fruitful ministries (i.e. works of God) is 'faith'. When we're too exhausted to keep trudging on in order to perform

the works of God while having every intention to do them out of love in gratitude, we automatically get back to our 'default position' to pose faith upon God, who is more than delighted to do the work for us, such as bringing in the two faith-seekers as baptismal candidates. For the crowds who set their eyes on earthly perspectives, they said, 'our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat. . . What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?' For Jesus, however, who set his eyes on heavenly perspectives, said, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' They said to him, 'sir, give us this bread always.' Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

That's right, whilst many of us are familiar with St. James' emphasizing that 'faith without works is dead', here Jesus interprets 'true work' as 'faith'. So in today's Gospel Reading, whilst the crowd showed that they were prepared to understand that the one whom God had sent was Jesus himself if he met their expectations, Jesus reminded them not to ignore the sign of the 5,000 fed by five loaves and two fish to take it as the sign of Jesus being sent by God as the true bread from heaven. And that completes an entire circle for our contemplation on thanksgiving today: first and foremost we are thankful for God sending us the true bread from heaven. In other words, we are always thankful to God in Christ to nurture and sustain us, in times good and bad – such gratitude fuels us to live and walk in faith as peace from on high enfolds us, and in all these, God keeps working through us. And that's the best thanksgiving offering we can offer to God: letting God use all that we have from God – talents, time, money and possessions . . . to do God's work, even through our parish ministries here. What a wonderful conclusion to our contemplations in the past three Sundays as our Stewardship Sundays! Alleluia!

Let us pray again: Generous God of love, you led us into your land of milk and honey and gave us bountiful harvesting. Accept our joyous praises and heart-felt gratitude, so that in our thanksgiving to you we may offer the abundance of our first-fruits in love initiated by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to share your gifts of love, justice and compassion to our loved ones and neighbors. Amen.