

The Great Thanksgiving

Solemnity of Corpus Christi, June 14, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Listen

*with the night falling we are saying thank you
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings
we are running out of the glass rooms
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky
and say thank you
we are standing by the water thanking it
standing by the windows looking out
in our directions
back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging
after funerals we are saying thank you
after the news of the dead
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you
over telephones we are saying thank you
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators
remembering wars and the police at the door
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you
in the banks we are saying thank you
in the faces of the officials and the rich
and of all who will never change
we go on saying thank you thank you
with the animals dying around us
taking our feelings we are saying thank you
with the forests falling faster than the minutes
of our lives we are saying thank you
with the words going out like cells of a brain
with the cities growing over us
we are saying thank you faster and faster
with nobody listening we are saying thank you
thank you we are saying and waving
dark though it is*

Some of you may know that poem by the late W.S. Merwin. He invites us to walk where few are able, down the fine lines between judgment and acceptance, despair and reverie. The poem may seem secular and a strange place to start on this Feast of Corpus Christi. But the poem came to mind as I pondered today's first reading, from Deuteronomy, and in particular the mention of the 'long way.'

For seven chapters already in Deuteronomy, Moses has been addressing the wandering and tattered children of Israel. But first we learn the context: the ‘*fortieth year*’ (1:3)—forty years since they were freed from Egypt and Pharaoh's brutality. Only a few of those who Moses addresses today had actually been there, in Egypt. A generation or two had already come and gone.

When they'd crossed that Red Sea, God's Promised Land seemed as if it might be right over on the other side. And it was, in fact, that close. But they'd been unable to claim it, mostly due to their own idolatry and quarreling and hard-heartedness. Hence, the *long way*.

And along the long way there had been hunger—a lot of it. God gave them something new—the miraculous manna from heaven. When it was first given, God told them to collect only enough for each day, hoping to teach their hearts to rely solely on the divine giving. So often, the children of Israel had tried to replace the divinely given daily bread with things that are passing away, often with disastrous, violent, degrading, and sorrowful consequences.

And so, in the passage we've now heard today, Moses implores them: “*Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart ... He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna ... in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord...*”

Some of us no doubt know the long way from our own lives, the long way of trial and error, hoarding, deceit and fear, the long way of avoiding or resisting or thwarting the true good. And maybe we know Henry Ford's pithy quote: “*If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten.*” There seems to have been a lot of that along the long way for the children of Israel during 40 years in the wilderness.

There seems to have been a lot of that in all of humanity, and no doubt, at times, in your life and in mine. Moses is walking a line, though, between shame for the past and faith in today and in the future: *Even in the midst of so many disappointments and setbacks and for so long, cling to your knowing that your God has been and is and will be with you.*

The Merwin poem with which I began also came to my mind, I suppose, because of the theme of thanksgiving. In the midst of beauty and horror, recognizing how often prosperity is co-mingled with injustice, appreciating the thrill of natural beauty and sorrowing for our violations of it, seeing our amazing human capacities for innovation and compassion and also indifference and coveting and blindness, amidst all “*... we go on saying thank you thank you.*” The poem is, in fact, simply titled *Thanks*.

Many of you will be familiar with the use of the word Eucharist to describe the mass, and you will know that the biblical Greek word *eucharistia* (εὐχαριστία) means thanksgiving. You know that the title over the canon of the mass in the Prayer Book is The Great Thanksgiving. And you'll surely recognize these words: “*It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.*” Or if you prefer Rite I: “*It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.*”

Our theology and experiences of the Sacrament and of thanksgiving in it and for it partly arise from the teachings and invitation of Jesus in today's text from John 6. With reference to Israel's *long way* and the manna from heaven, Jesus says, “*I am the bread of life ... the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*” Jesus is addressing, and offering to satisfy, that yearning in the human heart that is a God-given hunger for God-with-us. And we respond with thanks.

But there's more. Having received the bread of life, and having given thanks for it, you and I are also to be the bread of life for others who are hungry, perhaps starving, for what truly endures. In her book, *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles writes that *...the point of church isn't to get people to come to church. [The point is] to feed them, so they can go out and ... be Jesus.*"¹

Let us recognize our hunger. And let us *go on saying thank you thank you* for how Christ has genuinely satisfied our hunger with the bread of life. And let us also become the bread of life, and feed others in Christ's name and in such a way that they also are truly fed and give thanks. *Amen.*

¹ *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, Ballantine, 2008.