

Thanksgiving For Bethlehem

As we reflect in this Virginia newspaper on the day after Thanksgiving, the stomach is full of whatever we were fortunate to consume yesterday, and thoughts turn to Advent, which is the coming of Jesus Christ to the world at Christmas.

Thanksgiving is somewhat of a lost art, but not so far gone that it cannot return for a regular visit. True thanksgiving, which sees beyond worldly concerns to the things that God has done for us, is what we need.

Then we are not thanking someone for what they did for us, we are thanking God for what he is doing through them. The wonders of good health, family, and friends are not to be taken for granted. Unfortunately, the time we see how wonderful these blessings are is when they might be gone.

Jesus healed ten lepers one day. It was miraculous that he did it. It was shameful that the nine did not return to thank him. Where are we? Are we in the company of the one who came back to express his gratitude, or the nine who went on their merry (and new lease on life) way?

Charles Brown wondered the same thing. He offered these thoughts.

*One waited to see if the cure was real.
One waited to see if it would last.
One said he would see Jesus later.
One decided that he had never had leprosy.
One said he would have gotten well anyway.
One gave the glory to the priests.
One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything."
One said, "Any rabbi could have done it."
One said, "I was already much improved."*

Let us, in this brief moment between Thanksgiving and Christmas, give thank to God Almighty, who gives us the food we eat, and sends Jesus Christ, the bread of life at Christmas.

Is this day after Thanksgiving just a day to recover from the huge meal we had, or the lack of one? Or is it real for us, that God loves us so much that he came to earth at Bethlehem to save us from our sins?

A popular play and movie this time of year, is Christmas Carol. In one scene, the Ghost of Christmas Past has just paid a very scary visit to Ebenezer Scrooge. Clearly the old miser is shaken by the entire ordeal. But when he wakes up does he take the message to heart? No, he simply dismisses it by saying: "Bah, humbug, it wasn't real."

"Just a bit of last night's undigested beef," he says to himself, "There is more gravy about you than the grave."

Where is that feeling your heart which fills it so well that we are about to burst? The love of God is so big, so wonderful, and so powerful, that we must not dismiss it as indigestion. We must let it fill us until we just must overflow it to others!

Perhaps one of the ways we can change the world is to simply thank someone who has done something for you. You never know what a heartfelt thank you can do. So many go on without taking the time to do that, like the lepers in the reflection above, but the one that does, the one that might be you, can give a great gift.

In his autobiography, *Breaking Barriers*, syndicated columnist Carl Rowan tells about a teacher who greatly influenced his life. Rowan relates: *Miss Thompson reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a piece of paper containing a quote attributed to Chicago architect Daniel Burnham. I listened intently as she read: "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans, aim high in hope and work. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us."*

More than 30 years later, I gave a speech in which I said that Frances Thompson had given me a desperately needed belief in myself. A newspaper printed the story, and someone mailed the clipping to my beloved teacher. She wrote me: "You have no idea what that newspaper story meant to me. For years, I endured my brother's arguments that I had wasted my life. That I should have married and had a family. When I read that you gave me credit for helping to launch a marvelous career, I put the clipping in front of my brother. After he'd read it, I said, 'You see, I didn't really waste my life, did I?'"

This short and world-changing note gave purpose to the life of an aged teacher who was wondering if she had done anything good. Would a note or email or text or tweet from you do the same for someone else? Would a face to face meeting, a return to give thanks, do even more for you?

If Bethlehem is truly in us, we will have thanksgiving which changes others. Returning thanks, normally reserved for the mealtime prayer, takes on new meaning. Happy Thanksgiving. A blessed Christmas to you all!