

Christian Perspective: Thanksgiving

What comes to mind when we think of Thanksgiving? Family gatherings, good food, like turkey and pumpkin pie? Like many traditions, the real purpose of this day has been lost. While there is nothing wrong with the above, there is value in seeking to regain gratitude, especially since the early settlers were moved to practice it.

To regain a sentiment like 'thanksgiving', we need to clarify, at least in our own mind, what it is for which we are looking. What is 'thanksgiving'? Perhaps a better word to describe it is gratitude which prompts us to express what we feel in our hearts. Also, gratitude needs an object. Unless it is focused on an individual or any group of individuals, it remains something undefined. It may be no more than a good and happy feeling that comes and goes.

This brings us to the question: To whom do we or should we express our gratitude? For many of us, it is not that hard to think of those that we feel deserve our 'thank you'; friends, spouses, colleagues at work, parents, and children. I remember a pastor in a church we attended, speaking on marital relationships, who said that he felt the need to express appreciation to his wife for always having a clean, ironed shirt in the closet. How well, I recognize my own failure to be consistent in expressing niceties like this. We owe those we live with and are deserving of acknowledgments like these, such expressions of appreciation. Considering my own shortcomings, I am hoping that in some way this mental exercise of reflection will somehow 'stick' and impact the day to day interaction with those I meet on a daily basis. Thus far, the substance of this writing more or less deals with how we may acknowledge and show our gratitude to one another.

The early Canadian settlers and the Pilgrims in the south who initiated this tradition of observing each year a day of Thanksgiving had something different in mind. They had a hard life. The winters were brutally cold, against which there was minimal protection. Many knew, but for the grace of the Almighty God in whom they put their trust, they wouldn't have made it.

We as 21st century Canadians, by and large, do not have a history of coming from a culture of poverty, social discrimination or religious persecution. The majority of Canadians have grown up during a time of plenty and freedom.

One would think that having our needs met and enjoying prosperity would make us a contented people. In reality, it doesn't necessarily turn out that way. There are other factors that may prevent us from experiencing happiness along with gratitude. Lack of health is one factor. Another may be absence of harmony in our home or our place of employment. We may be concerned about political issues affecting us. Some of us may be able to relate to such scenarios. It does beg the question though: What motivated the early colonists to set aside a day to consider and reflect on the good things we have for which to be thankful?

Contrary to my own understanding of the early history of the North American colonists, it was not the Pilgrims who arrived in New England who were the first to celebrate Thanksgiving on the North American continent. It was the Euro peoples under Frobisher, an explorer during the reign of Elizabeth I, 42 years prior to the American Pilgrims' commemoration, who first celebrated such an event. Whereas the American Thanksgiving was a response to a plentiful harvest, Frobisher's Thanksgiving was an expression of gratitude for a safe return from a search for the Northwest Passage, avoiding the later fate of Henry Hudson and Sir John Franklin. It is interesting to note that this tragedy has been in the news lately due to the fact that this ship is believed to have been located very recently.

Other events giving cause for formal Thanksgiving celebrations have been England's delivery from the threat of the Spanish Armada. I recall the celebrations in my own country, Holland, to commemorate the liberation from Nazi occupation. The Dutch continue to express their gratitude to the Canadians for their sacrifices.

Two common factors in all of the historical commemorations listed here is the hardship and pain that people experienced and then when deliverance came, those in authority and commoners alike wanted to express their gratitude to God. It became a spontaneous expression of thanksgiving to the One who brought deliverance.

This gratitude ought to be a spontaneous desire among those who have the assurance of their sins forgiven through their Saviour, Jesus Christ. It is then that Thanksgiving is no longer a chore but a delight.

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