

Ps 97:1,4
Hy 1A
Ps 44:1,2,3
Ps 115:2,5,6
Ps 135:2,3,6
Deuteronomy 11:8-21
Colossians 3:5-11
Lord's Day 34.94,95

Yarrow, October 17, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Thanksgiving Day puts us at that time of year when we want to give thanks. That involves, however, that we look back on the year to take stock of how things have gone. We acknowledge with gratitude that the Lord has supplied our needs so that none of us were hungry or on the street. Yet some of us have experienced disappointment this year. The economy has chugged along, but hasn't been sterling; talk is that the American situation will drag Canada down further in time to come. The wet, cold spring and the dry summer have combined to produce lower than average crops in the Valley. The excessive rain of September has destroyed some of what grew and the remainder is difficult to harvest. Given that many in our congregation are connected to the agricultural sector, this reality can pinch our pockets in months to come. So: how shall we give thanks today?

The Lord places before us today the first commandment, with its prohibition against idolatry. We read together the relevant passage from Deuteronomy 11, and it will have struck you how Moses interweaves harvest with idolatry. It makes us wonder: how can our harvest, and the thanksgiving that comes with it, lead us –modern folk– to idolatry?

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRISTIANS HAVE NO NEED TO DO IDOLATRY IN ORDER TO GIVE THANKS.

1. How idolatry comes about,
2. What idolatry looks like,
3. Why thanksgiving trumps idolatry.

1. How idolatry comes about

The first commandment revolves around idolatry. In the eye of our mind we see pagans bowing before images of their gods, offering sacrifices in an effort to win their favour. The picture puts sin against the first commandment a long way from us, for we modern people don't do that sort of bowing and sacrificing anymore.... It turns out that idolatry can be far more sinister than that. And we a lot more vulnerable to idolatry than we think....

Moses spoke the material of the book of Deuteronomy as the people were about to cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land. This new land was different from the land of Egypt from which they had come because in Canaan it rained and in Egypt it did not. Egypt was desert, and got its water from the Nile River. Through a series of canals and ditches the Egyptians brought water to their fields – not unlike what we see in Sumas Prairie. That's the reference in vs 10, where Moses reminds Israel that

they “planted ... seed and irrigated [fields] by foot as a vegetable garden.” Getting a crop, then, depended heavily on careful human endeavour.

The Promised Land would not be like that. Vs 11: “the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven.” Hence the statement of vs 12: “It is a land the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.” How wonderful: the almighty God who placed a bond of love between Himself and Israel –so that they belonged to Him and He belonged to them– had a special eye for Israel’s land so that they would have a crop without needing to irrigate.... Easy!

True: God required particular behaviour from Israel before they could be sure of the rain. That’s clear from vs 13: “So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today –to love the LORD your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul– then I will send rain on your land in its season.... I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.” The point of course is that God provides His blessing on obedience in the covenant. If the people disregard the Lord and His commands, they cannot expect His blessing.

Then follows the warning of vs 16: “be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods....” The result will be vs 17: “then the LORD’s anger will burn against you, and He will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce.” So there’s the question: how could Israel be enticed to “turn away and worship other gods”? How could the matter of rain and crops lead them to idolatry?

One could say: that’s a reference to the Israelites learning from the Canaanites how to worship Baal, and then try to get their rain from Baal. For that’s indeed what the Canaanites believed; Baal was the god of crops and fertility, and so if you needed rain you sacrificed to Baal and when it had rained you thanked Baal. So the Israelites were to watch out that they did not adopt the religion of the locals and seek their needs from Baal. True.

But the bigger danger the Lord refers to, congregation, is elsewhere. For it’s *possible* to see rain as simply a phenomenon of nature not directed by God. So: you don’t ask God for rain and you don’t thank Him for rain; you separate rain from God. It’s also *possible* to see the growth of crops as a result of *the farmer’s ingenuity* – for a good farmer makes the seed-bed just right, applies the right fertilizer at the right time and in the right amount, perhaps even adds water at the right time.... Then Israel may not have had the agricultural technology we have, but thinking and acting as if one is independent from God could happen in Israel as much as it can happen today. And let’s not kid ourselves: the world in which we live *has* separated rain and crop from God, and *we are not above this separation*. It is in us to say with Israel, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me” (Deuteronomy 8:17). That makes your power, your strength, your brains your idol – which God warned against in Deuteronomy 11. We realise that this is a very modern sin, and it abounds around us.

But, we say, we’re Christians; we realize that whatever crop we received, whatever income this year, came not from our ingenuity and good effort but from God’s gracious hand.... We’re not idolaters.... Before we settle that conclusion in our minds, I’d like to give the Lord’s instruction in Deuteronomy 11 more colour. That brings us to our second point:

2. What idolatry looks like.

Picture in the eye of our mind, brothers and sisters, the original setting when the Lord God first gave the first commandment. The people of Israel were congregated around the foot of Mt Sinai, while the LORD God came down upon the mountain in majesty; the people saw the smoke, the lightning, the cloud-of-glory on the mountain. From the top of the mountain came that majestic voice to the people

at the foot: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." It was an amazing proclamation, for the God-of-majesty on the mountain declared that Israel-at-the-foot was His people, and He was their God. He spoke of a bond of love for Israel, such that He *had* a people, and they *had* a God; they *belonged* to Him, and He *belonged* to them. He claimed them, and they claimed Him.

Amazing! This people God claimed for Himself had been slaves in Egypt. Theirs had been a hard and cruel life, for the Egyptians worked their slaves so ruthlessly that the Israelites were scattered throughout the land as they sought straw for bricks. Giving birth involved a death-sentence; new-born boys were to be drowned in the Nile River.... Not surprisingly, "the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out..." (Exodus 2:23). Here's a level of despair not unlike that experienced by the people of Kolontar in Hungary this past week....

Now, what were Israel's options in the thick of their misery? In the words of the Catechism: what could they trust in order to escape their misery, feel good? We could list them, like this:

- a. They could try to grow some marijuana or start a distillery, and use its produce to take the edge off their pain.
- b. They could try to flee their circumstances, run away.
- c. They could appeal to their government for mercy, help, deliverance.
- d. They could join the Egyptians, adopt Egyptian religion, and expect Egypt's gods to care for them.

Would any of these potential solutions in practice have helped to alleviate their misery? The answer is Yes, for the short term such a solution would help. Consider:

- a. Drugs and alcohol could indeed dull the pain of their slavery – for the short-term. But after the effects of the drug or the drink wore off –as they invariably did after a few hours– the agony returned – with a vengeance. The drug or the drink did not ultimately help.
- b. Running away could get you some short term relief, for in the first hours of escaping the slave-drivers whip wouldn't be cracking over your back. But soon enough the hounds would be after you.... And even if you managed to get away from civilization you'd be lost in the desert around the Nile basin. And for the ill-equipped, deserts are notoriously unforgiving.... Running away would not ultimately help.
- c. Serving Egypt's gods may have helped to integrate the Israelites into Egyptian society. But here too the benefit would be short term only – for some months later the LORD God well and truly beat up the Egyptian gods through the ten plagues and the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. Any who trusted in the gods of Egypt were totally embarrassed and disappointed by the performance of Egypt's gods in the face of Yahweh's onslaught. Serving Egypt's gods could not ultimately help.

Were there options, then, for the Israelites? How could they realistically escape their misery? They simply had no way of escape – until the LORD God came with His mighty arm to work deliverance. Majestically, delightfully He broke the Egyptians and took the people He claimed for Himself out of their bondage. In the desert He gave them freedom, gave them manna and water and safety, established with them His covenant of grace, set up in their midst the tabernacle with its glorious gospel of reconciliation with the almighty Creator of heaven and earth, and even promised His people a land flowing with milk and honey.... And all of it was *freely given*, without Israel needing to resort to brains or brawn.

In *that* context, congregation, consider now this question: would it make sense for these slaves-become-children-of-God to seek solutions to life's problems anywhere else than from God alone? Ahead of them could be days in which they're confronted with sickness, loneliness, a sense of

inadequacy, could even be days of war and hunger or days of marriage strain or disappointment in children or the house burn down or the business take a hit, etc. Where should they turn for help? Alcohol? Drugs? Try to run away? Hold out your hand to the government? Surely, beloved, it's so obvious: given that the people around Mt Sinai had witnessed the power and the mercy of the God they *had*, the God who *claimed* them, it would be stupid to turn to the gods of Egypt for assistance in life's troubles; the LORD had just trashed Egypt's gods! Similarly, it would be stupid to seek deliverance from their troubles by seeking to drown their misery in drink or narcotics, for the LORD their God had demonstrated in the plagues His total superiority over the crops of the land – including barley and marijuana. Should they seek their help from government? That too was folly, for the LORD had just demonstrated that His power was infinitely greater than that of Egypt's Pharaoh – though he was the world-power of the day. Throwing in your lot with anyone or anything other than the almighty Creator – He made His covenant with you – is plain dumb. In fact, it's the blindness that characterizes unbelief...

I suspect we're all reasonably comfortable with what's been said on this point so far, and that's in large part because it concerns Israel, a people far away and long ago. Let me try to bring it closer to home.

We've all experienced the day that we were convinced that we just couldn't be happy unless we had shoes like she had (or a shirt like his or a coat like hers). Going to school, going to work, going to church with those old clunkers on our feet – no, we just couldn't do that, we felt so self-conscious, everybody was going to laugh at us; we just *had* to get those new shoes and otherwise we just weren't going to have a good day. Or: somehow, somehow, you have got to get the approval of that cool group over there. If you can't get their approval, you just can't be happy.... You'll *die* if they ignore you again.... Or: you'll feel better if you eat that chocolate, empty that bottle, masturbate, view pornography; the ache is too great without it.... Or: you just *have* to have a boat like *they've* got, or a tan or a hairdo or a house or a marriage or a ... – and the list goes on and on ad infinitum; you need something, anything, and unless you get it you just can't be happy.... As long as that crop is still in the ground, as long as your debt isn't paid, as long as you haven't got a comfortable retirement package safely tucked away, you just can't relax, you can't be content....

That, beloved, is idolatry (cf Colossians 3:5). The Catechism has learned from Scripture what idolatry looks like, and so explains what the Lord requires in the first commandment like this: I am to "expect all good from Him only." The good I want, that sense of well-being, of feeling happy, of having sufficient is to come from God alone – and not from the shoes on my feet or the shirt on my back or the treasure in my garage or the fickle crowd over yonder or the crop in my barn or the money in my bank. Answer 95 repeats the thought in its definition of idolatry; "idolatry is having or inventing something" – *anything* – "in which to put our trust instead of, or in addition to, the only true God." "To put our trust" ... for – yes, for what? Well, for that sense of well-being we want so much, that contentment inside that puts us in the clouds.... That's idolatry: looking to *anything* other than God alone for that sense of wellness.

Actually, it's quite understandable. You *have* to have those shoes, and otherwise you *can't* go to school. You get those shoes, and you feel like a million bucks. But one snide comment from some insensitive soul..., and your good feeling collapses like a house of cards, and the fun is out of wearing those shoes.... That, too, is something we can all relate to. And that's characteristic of idolatry; idolatry gives a short term high, and then drops you like a stone – and you feel flat, deceived, empty.

It can't be otherwise. The *thing* you count on to supply the good you want is a creature like you. Does a *thing* – be it a shoe or a shirt, be it a person or a crowd, be it a drug or an activity, even a bar of

gold— have the power to give you a lasting sense of well-being and positive purpose? A thing is only a *thing*, and its ability to carry you is so limited. Contrast that, now, with the almighty Creator who gives life and breath to every creature, without whose will no shoe can be fashioned, no drug can exist, no crowd can live, no snide remark can be voiced, no economy can spin. This almighty Creator has established with you a bond of love—it's signified and seal in your baptism!— so that you belong to Him and He belongs to you; He *has* a child (you), and you *have* a God (Him). More, so precious are you to this God that He gave His only Son to set you free from bondage to sin and Satan, and this Son of God has actually gone to the cross to atone for *your* sins and reconcile you to the God who claimed you so that you really and truly are now God's child and heir to life eternal with Him on a renewed Earth. Talk about *having* a God and this God *having* a child! More, that bond of love God established with you and confirmed in Jesus Christ includes also the blessed promise of the Holy Spirit, and that's to say that this God you *have* is pleased to dwell in your heart through His Spirit, even renews your heart so as to be a fitting dwelling place for the Spirit. How delightfully rich He is in what He's given! This same God—the God you *have*— tells the Christians of Rome through Paul that if He gave up even His own Son to atone for our sin, "how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?" (cf Romans 8:32). But if it is *He* who will graciously give me all things, why shall I seek my good from any creature?? Expecting that sense of good, of well-being, of happiness, from a pair of shoes or the approval of the cool group or from a good crop is an offence to God simply because of who He is! That was true of the escaped slaves at the foot of the mountain long ago, and it is equally true of us who are delivered in Jesus Christ from bondage to Satan today.

Here, beloved congregation of the Lord, is need for repentance. It is fitting that we, delivered as we are by God's grace in Jesus Christ, acknowledge that we repeatedly, frequently, seek our sense of happiness from a created thing. Yet here is the wonder and the beauty of the gospel: the God we have, the God who has us as His children, is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, ready to forgive. It was for that very reason that He gave His Son! A life of gratitude for His gracious forgiveness of our sins against the first commandment implies that we determine anew to know this God well, trust in Him alone for all our needs, and so expect all good from Him alone. And when He in perfect wisdom gives us things we'd rather not have, we'll not get bitter or rebel against Him or turn to creatures for escape or comfort or happiness, but we'll "submit to Him with all humility and patience." Gratitude for His mercy in making me His child, for making Himself my God, looks like something!

That leaves our third point:

3. Why thanksgiving trumps idolatry.

We cannot get around us: we sin against the first commandment. Yet the Lord our God, for Jesus' sake, does not deal with us as we deserve! Though we are so weak when it comes to trusting Him alone for all our needs, though we fail to expect all good from Him only, though we do trust creatures – including ourselves and our knowledge of technology— in order to get ahead, the Lord in mercy does not withhold His goodness; instead, for Jesus' sake, He pours blessing upon blessing upon us. Then it may well be that He in wisdom has given less this year than last year, but everything we have is His *gift*, and it's all given *in spite of* our weaknesses and sins. In the face of our sins against the first commandment, then, we still have reason for Thanksgiving – simply because the Lord covers our sins with the blood of His Son.

That perspective, we realize, serves only to *increase* our sense of gratitude. For the thanksgiving is not only for the goods received in the past months, but that sense of gratitude is *compounded* by the realization that it's so *undeserved*. And that reality in turn prompts to renewed determination to have

no other gods before Him in the weeks and months ahead – for He *has* given us all things in Christ and He will continue to give us all things in Christ. Such is His unchanging faithfulness in the face of our stubborn weaknesses.

Thanksgiving Day then: to Him all praise!