

Today is the last Sunday before Advent, the last Sunday of the church year, the Feast of Christ the King. It is a time when we remember and celebrate that Jesus is our King

Usually on Christ the King Sunday, I preach about what it means to live with dual citizenship. Yes, in this world we are all citizens of particular nation states. In this room most of us are citizens of the United States of America.

But Christians are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is our King, and not just king, but King of kings and Lord of lords. In the triumphant words of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, which are lifted from the book of Revelation,

*The kingdom of this world;  
Is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ  
And He shall reign for ever and ever<sup>1</sup>*

[8:00] Or as we will sing at the 10:30 service:

10:30] Or as we sang in our opening hymn:

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
doth his successive journeys run;  
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
till moons shall wax and wane no more.<sup>2</sup>*

But every year near Christ the King Sunday there is another holiday. Every year, either on the Thursday immediately before or the Thursday immediately after Christ the King, we Americans celebrate Thanksgiving Day. And Thanksgiving is also a part of our Episcopal Church calendar of feasts. And as I mentioned earlier, today in our service we are giving a nod both to Christ the King Sunday and Thanksgiving Day.

And as I said earlier, our Old Testament lesson and Psalm are drawn from Thanksgiving readings. And our Epistle and Gospel are from Christ the King readings.

Our Epistle from Colossians tells us that, "God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, this Epistle from Colossians is appointed for Christ the King Sunday, since it talks about us being made part of the kingdom of Christ, God's beloved Son.

And yet, our reading from Colossians also says this:

"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rev 11:15

<sup>2</sup> Hymn 544

<sup>3</sup> Col 1:13-14

<sup>4</sup> Col 1:11-12

Notice that. "Joyfully giving thanks to the Father." The Father has made us citizens of the Kingdom of Christ. Therefore, we should respond by joyfully giving thanks.

So what does it mean to give thanks? What is Christian Thanksgiving all about?

There actually is a major impediment to being thankful.

I think about the prayer from the old, classic 1965 Jimmy Stewart western movie, *Shenandoah*. In that movie, Jimmy Stewart's character leads his family in saying grace. And this is his prayer:

*Lord, we cleared this land;  
We plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it.  
We cooked the harvest.  
It wouldn't be here—we wouldn't be eating it—if we hadn't done it all ourselves.  
We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel  
But we thank you just the same anyway, Lord, for this food we're about to eat. Amen.*

Is that what giving thanks is all about? Lord, we did all the hard work to obtain this food? But, as an afterthought, Lord, thank you just the same anyway?

Or maybe instead of Jimmy Stewart, we can look to the now classic cartoon character, Bart Simpson. 29 years ago, Bart offered this prayer before the family meal:

*Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves,  
so thanks for nothing.*<sup>5</sup>

These two prayers illustrate one of the biggest impediments to an attitude of thankfulness. And that is a false sense of self-reliance.

These prayers are saying to God, "Thanks for nothing. We don't need you. We can get along just fine all by ourselves." It's hard to be thankful when you think you owe everything to yourself.

And that is one of the great flaws of Jimmy Stewart's character in *Shenandoah*. He later says in the movie about his farm,

*I've got five hundred acres of good, rich dirt, here, and as long as the rains come and the sun shines, it'll grow anything I have a mind to plant. And we pulled every stump, and we cleared every field, and we done it ourselves...*

But what Jimmy Stewart's character forgets here is that his hard work is possible because he has been given the gift of life. He's been given the gift of a hard-working family who helps him. He is on 500 acres of rich soil that he didn't create. And his abundant crops are produced because of the sun and rain as well as the biological processes of plant growth.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Simpsons*, Season 2 Episode 4

So yes, he's worked hard. But his success is not only because of his work. It's also because of all the gifts he has been given by God, whether he realizes it, or acknowledges it, or not.

In the movie *Shenandoah*, Jimmy Stewart and his family go through many trials and tribulations. But at the end he is reunited with his son. And he is profoundly thankful. And for the first time in his life he is able to truly give thanks to God. With tears in his eyes he joins in the song,

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

*Praise him all creatures here below*

*Praise him above ye heavenly host*

*Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*

For our own spiritual health, it is vitally important to acknowledge all the gifts we've been given by God, and to be thankful for them.

We've been given the gift of life. We've been given talents and abilities to do things in the world. We have been given this world—this gift of creation which gives us a place to stand, literally. We have inherited benefits from the hard work of generations who have come before us. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans we've been fortunate to be living in the most powerful and prosperous nation in the history of the world. Add to that blessings of food and shelter, of family and friends, of levels of freedom and liberty that are the envy of much of the world.

We indeed have much to be thankful for. As the saying goes, if you pause to think, you'll have cause to thank.

And it's important to do so. It's spiritually vital that we give thanks to God for all of his blessings. Some variation of the word 'thanks' or 'thanksgiving' appears 155 times in scripture. Giving thanks is an important part of our spiritual heritage. In fact, it's what we do every Sunday. Every time we celebrate communion we are engaged in Thanksgiving. The very word "Eucharist" itself means giving thanks.

There's no doubt that being truly thankful to God is something we're called to. And as St. Paul reminds us in Colossians, we are called to joyfully give thanks to God.

And as Paul goes on to say, we Christians need to be especially thankful for the gift of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus we are adopted as God's sons and daughters. In him we become part of God's kingdom. In him we have the gifts of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Through him and in him, we know the love of God.

And every time we come to this table, we are given the amazing gift of being able to share in God's presence and God's life through the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

If you pause to think you'll have cause to thank.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

With that in mind, I would invite you to turn to 837 in *The Book of Common Prayer*.  
Let us pray together the Litany of Thanksgiving:

*Let us give thanks to God our Father for all  
his gifts so freely bestowed upon us.*

*For the beauty and wonder of your creation,  
in earth and sky and sea, We thank you,  
Lord.*

*For all that is gracious in the lives of men  
and women, revealing the image of Christ,  
We thank you, Lord.*

*For our daily food and drink, our homes and  
families, and our friends, We thank you,  
Lord.*

*For minds to think, and hearts to love, and  
hands to serve, We thank you, Lord.*

*For health and strength to work, and leisure  
to rest and play,  
We thank you, Lord.*

*For the brave and courageous, who are  
patient in suffering and faithful in adversity,  
We thank you, Lord.*

*For all valiant seekers after truth, liberty,  
and justice, We thank you, Lord.*

*For the communion of saints, in all times  
and places, We thank you, Lord.*

*Above all, we give you thanks for the great  
mercies and promises given to us in Christ  
Jesus our Lord;  
To him be praise and glory, with you, O  
Father, and the Holy Spirit, now and for  
ever. Amen.*