

Thanksgiving

A Proclamation: for a Day of Public Thanksgiving and Praise.

Proclamation: October 14, 1795. Published by Authority (Seal) of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts by the Governor.

Forasmuch as the occasional meeting of a people for the exercise of piety and devotion towards God, more especially of those who enjoy the light of divine revelation, has a strong tendency to impress their minds with a sense of dependence upon Him and their obligations to Him. I have thought fit, according to the ancient and laudable practice of our renowned ancestors, to appoint a day of public thanksgiving to God, for the great benefits, which He has been pleased to bestow upon us in the year past.

At this time in history, Thanksgiving Day proclamations had become a firmly entrenched tradition in New England. The first Thanksgiving Day on American soil occurred when the Pilgrim Fathers, by order of Governor William Bradford, held a three-day festival to commemorate their harvest in the autumn of 1621. Despite this early beginning, Thanksgiving Day did not become a truly national American holiday until November 26, 1863, when President Lincoln proclaimed a national harvest festival.

Harvest celebrations are as old as civilization itself. The American and Canadian Thanksgiving Day celebrations are part of a venerable tradition. But the meaning of the day itself has changed since the days of the Pilgrim Fathers. It was basically a home festival with strong religious overtones. Secularism altered its original content. Thanksgiving has become a bad time for turkeys and a profitable season for supermarkets. For many people it has become another holiday with hopefully good weather as it comes late in the fall season.

Churches still have special worship services. Produce from farms decorates many sanctuaries. I know of a church where machinery was displayed to show how important it has become in modern farming.

Most Christians acknowledge dependence upon God in a vague and general way. Most of us thank the Lord for certain things, such as food, (and we've all heard some rather facetious remarks about saying grace when the meal does not appear to satisfy the taste bud). But if we are candid about it, we usually say thanks for things that please us, and things we have asked for.

We find it difficult to say thanks for gifts received which, are not according to our taste. Thanksgiving is a spiritual exercise that can take effort. We find it easier to take things for granted than to be truly grateful. Toward the end of his long and useful life, the British author G.K. Chesterton was asked what was the most important lesson he had learned. He replied, "it was to take things with gratitude and not to take them for granted."

Some have taught that reverence and gratitude toward God should flow naturally from man's reason. But often it does not work that way. People are frequently fighting a war of independence with God. The more their hearts turn away from God the less grateful they will be. Why say thanks for what you possess if you have worked for it with your own hands? But this is not God honouring. Of such people, the Bible says that "although they once knew God, they did not honour Him as God, or give Him thanks." Thankless children we all are more or less, for we comprehend so dimly the truth of our relationship with God.

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is," said Shakespeare, "to have a thankless child." Genuine and profound gratitude, a fruit of faith, is found only where there is a deep sense of dependence on God. When we see again that the Creator provides the seed time and the harvest, our hearts will turn to Him. And it is only through Jesus Christ that we can approach the Creator as our heavenly Father.

Many complain about the state of the economy. And for many it is tough to make ends meet. Yet we have so much, compared to underdeveloped nations. We still have much to thank God for. War or unrest tears many nations, while we enjoy peace. While so many are starving, we still have food on the table. While millions have no freedom of speech or movement, we are free to speak and to move anywhere in our nation. With the poet of Bible times, we might well ask:

*What shall I render to the Lord
for all His benefits to me?
Now shall my soul, by grace restored,
Give worthy thanks, O Lord to Thee?*