

“JOYFULLY GIVING THANKS”

a sermon on Jeremiah 23:1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, and Luke 23:33-43
for Christ the King
November 20, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
Sumner, Mississippi

There is something very “earthy” about this time of year. One of autumn's primary attractions, after all, is simply taking in the colors, and the sights, and the smells. Another attraction, at least in these parts, is football – a game still played largely outdoors, and in which “the elements” can still be an important factor and play a major role in determining the outcome.

And then, of course, this is harvest time – when, among those whose livelihood derives from crops in the field, there comes the blessed relief and sense of gratitude when “all is safely gathered in.”

“Giving thanks” is one of the most natural of all human acts. And doing so at the time of the “ingathering” has been done for as long as human beings have been “planting” and “harvesting” – even when, in societies like ours, most of the population now dwells in cities, and those who are directly engaged in sowing and reaping are in the minority.

The truth is, *long* before humans ever had the notion of one “Almighty God” creating and sustaining the universe, they reached the simple conclusion that “beings” bigger than themselves had somehow guided the process of “seedtime and harvest.” What other conclusion could a person draw from the “miracle” of life and growth?

Jesus referenced that miracle on a number of occasions in his teachings, primarily simply as an *assumption* in which we all trust, but also with respect to how God can make *big* things out of *little* things – faith, the size of a mustard seed, can move mountains. And not only that, but that mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds, “when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Israel’s ancient faith stories, of course, include the narrative of creation itself, in which it is proclaimed that God “brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind,” and then also the story of Noah – which concludes

with God's proclamation that while the earth remains, "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

That was perhaps the most crucial of all God's ancient promises – because it dealt with an aspect of human existence that everyone could acknowledge was completely beyond human control. God could choose not to be "with" the people in their battles, and yet at least they could fight with their own hands. He might not give them direction, and yet at least they would have their own intuition and reason. But if God didn't ensure seedtime and harvest, and the "cycle" of the seasons, all was lost.

And the fact is (questions about the effects of climate change and our human impact on it aside), even with all of our technological advancements, and all our accumulated wisdom, and all the rest, we humans are *still* completely at the earth's mercy to make seedtime come again next year, and keep the cycle going. And so it is autumn. The leaves are changing, the grass is dying, it's getting *cold* – and there isn't *anything* we can do about it. And if the earth chose to *keep* tilting us upward, away from the sun, there wouldn't be anything we could do about *that* either. And we *know* it.

Which is why our trust in the *cycle* remains a profoundly religious act, even in the era of modern science. Even if we know a thing or two about gravity, and what causes planets to "rotate" and move as they do. We give thanks, at the time of the harvest, as a demonstration not only of our gratitude, but of our trust in God's control over the cycle of nature – the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, in which stars and planets "follow their courses," instead of acting randomly, and unpredictably.

The nation of Israel maintained an annual cycle of fasts and feasts structured around their agricultural calendar. The first feast of the year – the Passover – recalled and celebrated their escape from Egypt and the hands of Pharaoh. The remaining feasts stretched from "first fruits" to "ingathering."

In the Christian era, of course, we use a different calendar – based entirely on the events of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and his ongoing Spiritual presence with the church. And yet, there are still *connections* between that calendar and seasons (at least for those of us in the northern hemisphere where it was developed) – from the Christmas season as a "winter festival," to the "new life" we celebrate at Easter (in the Springtime). Those connections are not by coincidence. They are the early Christian Church's *intentional* attempts to connect what goes on "in here," with what is happening "out there."

Today, on the “church calendar” is a celebration called, “Christ the King.” It is the last Sunday of the year. The end. The time to look back over the entire “cycle” of the seasons and celebrations, and give a final word of thanks and praise, before the cycle starts over again, and we begin our preparations for the celebration of the Lord’s birth – which begins in winter’s darkness, and moves forward through the coming months to the dawn of salvation, culminating in the new life and radiant light of the resurrection.

The passages suggested in the lectionary for today’s celebration aren’t about “seedtime and harvest.” They are more “cosmic,” than “earthy.” And they also come from times when giving thanks was very difficult for the faithful - times of persecution, or famine, or war. In our reading from Colossians, Paul prays that the faithful may “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.”

What the readings have in common, of course, is that they all refer in one way or another to Jesus Christ as our “King.” In Colossians, that is *specifically* the reason for and content of our joyful thanksgiving – because God “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the *kingdom* of his beloved Son.”

Israel’s fervent hope was that God would one day “restore the kingdom,” and the prophets proclaimed that hope in no uncertain terms. The *later* prophets, including Jeremiah, understood that bringing such a hope into reality would require significant change in our human nature – a radical transformation by which the law would come to be written “on our hearts.”

What Jesus’ death on the cross means, for those of us who believe, is that the “kingdom” in this radical transformation isn’t even a *physical kingdom* any longer, but a “spiritual” one – a tie that binds Jesus’ followers to him, and through him to one another, gives us a *bond* that transcends human institutions, and boundaries, and even *time*. Even “life” and “death.” Living in the “kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son” means that you and I are – not *can be*, but *are* – connected, spiritually, to each other, and indeed to every other believer, regardless of what earthly divisions keep us distant or apart, or “at odds.”

That is what we celebrate on Christ the King Sunday. Human institutions come and go. Earthly kingdoms rise and fall. Presidents come and go, and their political parties, for that matter, wax and wane. But no matter what, we Christians can joyfully give thanks, because we know that there is a kingdom not made of human hands, of which we are a part, by which we are enabled to live more and

more into God's presence and light, as well as deeper and ever more restored relationships together – even in the midst of human divisions, and strife, and hardships.

That's the *theological* affirmation we are celebrating on Christ the King Sunday. And it comes, every year and not by coincidence, at or around to our communal celebrations of the ingathering – in the United States, our National Thanksgiving holiday on the fourth Thursday of November.

Our Thanksgiving Day celebrations are about the harvest, and the food itself, to some extent. But they are more than that. They are about families, and communities. They are about *memories*. They are about taking time to be together. To talk. To catch up on each other's lives.

I want to suggest to you that all of those “traditions” are not *unrelated* to the theological affirmation of Christ the King Sunday. In Christ, we have the ability to be *truly* in right relationship with each other in this world – and in relationships that *transcend* this life and place. And those relationships are *good*. They are what God has *intended* for us all along. And God, in Christ, *blesses* our efforts to strengthen them, restore them, and even *relish* in them.

And so may your gatherings, your food, your fellowship, the observances of your family and community traditions, and everything else you do this week in celebration of the harvest, be done, as Paul put it, “joyfully giving thanks” for all that God has done, is doing, and will continue to do in your life, in the lives of those you know and love, and of all those in whom He dwells.

And to God our Father, and Christ our King, the Lord of our lives, be the Glory.