

Homily for Thanksgiving

In the year 1607 Martin Reinkardht wrote the hymn “Now Thank We All Our God.” It was a rather stunning creation since the German village where Martin lived had fallen victim to the pestilence that was savaging Europe. Included among the dead were Martin Reinkardht’s wife and children. Yet, in the midst of such a catastrophic social and personal loss, Reinkardht would write this great hymn of praise that we will use as our closing hymn this evening.

Some fourteen years later our Pilgrim ancestors would echo Martin’s profound faith in God at our first Thanksgiving celebration. This celebration was not born out of abundance. The members of Plymouth Colony had suffered a terrible journey to this “new land.” They experienced the harshness of their first New England winter and lost countless of their members as a result of travel, weather and disease. They were strangers in a strange land and the land did not yield an easy welcome. But gratitude trumped despair as they gathered to celebrate our first Thanksgiving dinner.

But history is a tricky subject. One would think that what happened with our Pilgrim ancestors was the start of an annual celebration. Truth be told, the Feast of Thanksgiving disappeared as

quickly as it came. In the years that followed that first Thanksgiving, the custom of taking a day to give thanks all but disappeared.

It wasn't until the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln that a Thursday in November was declared a national annual celebration. Of course, what was striking about this is that a proclamation of gratitude in the midst of a country divided, the death of his own son and the bloodshed of so many Americans, seemed a strange time to say "thank you."

I thought of this as I read a letter from a most wonderful woman who is a dear friend of mine. She has been suffering from cancer of the jawbone. The surgeon removed the right side of her jaw and a certain degree of reconstructive surgery followed. What was truly painful was the many weeks of radiation therapy and the following weeks of healing. Her children tell me that the pain had no equal.

Just last week I received a letter from her thanking me for my prayers. In that letter she writes: "How fortunate I am! As we approach the Thanksgiving holiday I count my blessings. They are many. I am filled with gratitude..." I must admit I was humbled by this woman's faith and gratitude in the midst of such personal suffering.

I share all of this with you because no matter what is going on in our lives, no matter what pain we face as a nation or as individuals, we need to learn that gratitude is an expression of profound faith that no

matter what happens God stands with us, God walks with us....and more times than we could ever imagine, God carries us.

Thanksgiving is a very wonderful American tradition. But it is a tradition that is rooted not in the abundance of what we have but in the knowledge that no matter what we have or have not, God is very near to us and it is God who sustains us.

I often end my Thanksgiving reflection by reading a sermon written by Benjamin Franklin. I decided this year to forfeit that reading and instead quote just one line from that wonderful sermon. Benjamin Franklin ends his sermon with these words “People wrapped up in themselves make very small packages.”

Whenever we become imprisoned by looking inward at our own lives, we loose the ability to look around us and discover the richness of God’s love that surrounds us.

Thanksgiving calls us to discover, once again, that God’s hand rests upon our shoulders and God’s love surrounds our lives.

May all of us have a blessed Thanksgiving. May we sing “Now Thank We All Our God” with hearts filled with trusting faith and the sure knowledge that God is with us today, tomorrow and forever.