

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

Thanksgiving Day (USA)

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.²

“And it shall be, when thou art come in unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance, and possessest it, and dwellest therein; That thou shalt take of the first of all the fruit of the earth, which thou shalt bring of thy land that the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt put it in a basket, and shalt go unto the place which the LORD thy God shall choose to place his name there. And thou shalt go unto the priest that shall be in those days, and say unto him, I profess this day unto the LORD thy God, that I am come unto the country which the LORD sware unto our fathers for to give us. And the priest shall take the basket out of thine hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD thy God. And thou shalt speak and say before the LORD thy God, A Syrian ready to perish was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous: And the Egyptians evil entreated us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage: And when we cried unto the LORD God of our fathers, the LORD heard our voice, and looked on our affliction, and our labour, and our oppression: And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders: And he hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land, which thou, O LORD, hast given me. And thou shalt set it before the LORD thy God, and worship before the LORD thy God: And thou shalt rejoice in every good thing which the LORD thy God hath given unto thee, and unto thine house, thou, and the Levite, and the stranger that is among you.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Verse of the sixth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.³

“... Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed. Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest [SHOW-est] thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Theme and Development:

Today we in the United States sit down to the 21st Century iteration of what was originally an harvest festival. As we gorge ourselves with the fruits of the earth, concentrating on the physical pleasures of that basic human good, eating, and on the social pleasures of sharing time and

fellowship with our families and friends, it is all too easy for us to fall into one or both of two ever-yawning traps.

The first such trap is for us to slide inattentively into assuming that this is our natural condition. That is, we are all too prone to assuming that we are just naturally entitled to be filled to repletion with the good things of life and to be leisured, entertained, and secure. This is the error into which the rich farmer fell, the one of whom St. Luke wrote, who was planning how to build storage barns enough for his bounteous harvest at the same time that God was planning to call him home to heaven, after which his heir would enjoy the benefit of his crops.⁵

The second such trap is to assume that these things come to us as the products of our own self-sufficiency. Then we forget that we owe everything we have to God and that it is only God's grace and sufferance that permits us to continue to enjoy them. It is for this reason that, so long as we keep ourselves firmly in the right frame of mind, it is a good thing to give rein to such a basic human instinct as the one which caused our ancestors to celebrate each successful harvest, for they well knew that not all harvests are thus successful and poor harvests were, in their world, inevitably followed by hard times.

Notice that I said "so long as we keep ourselves firmly in the right frame of mind, it is a good thing to give rein to such a basic human instinct...." That right frame of mind, which we must struggle always to maintain, is the consciousness that we owe thanks and praise to God for what we have. And in the particular context of a harvest feast, such as today's, we must be especially careful to render thanks to God not only for the food that sustains our bodies but for the intangible but vital goods that food symbolizes. For the food we eat in our communal rites of thanksgiving is a *type*, or foreshadowing, of a spiritual reality that we, as Christians, must ever strive to hold in the forefront of our minds. That is why we call our most central act of worship "the Great Thanksgiving", for that, after all, is what the word "Eucharist" means.

To understand this, let us return to the words of today's Second Lesson. The people to whom Our Lord was there speaking had been

among the five thousand Galileans He had the day before fed with five barley loaves and two fish,⁶ and who had been so impressed by that miracle that they followed Him in order to see more. As He told them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”⁷

Then He made clear to them the real purpose that lay behind the miracle of their feeding which had so impressed them: “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you, for on him has God the Father set his seal.”⁸

The terms Our Lord uses here are echoed later in the same Chapter when He said: “I am the bread of life.... This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”⁹

And these words are strikingly reminiscent of those He used on another occasion when He was revealing both the significance of His mission here on earth and the related nature of the Eucharist He would establish at the end of that mission. That was when He taught the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar¹⁰ [**SIGH-carr**]: “[W]however drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up into eternal life.”¹¹

There you have it: Jesus the Christ, that is, the Anointed One, the *Meshiach* [**mesh-EYE-ock**] or Messiah, declaring that He is the Bread of Heaven and the Water of Life. This is the reason that very often the celebrant of the Eucharist says to himself, *sotto voce*, just before receiving the Body of Christ, and referring to Psalm 105: “I will eat the bread of heaven, and call upon the Name of the Lord.”¹² And then, just before receiving His Precious Blood, the celebrant will say, quoting directly from Psalm 116: “I will receive the cup of salvation, and call upon the Name of the Lord.”¹³

Conclusion:

So as we stuff ourselves today with our traditional harvest meal, let us remember that not only do we owe God thanks for the physical nourishment that food affords us, but we also owe Him thanks for the spiritual sustenance that food symbolizes. As Jesus said to the ancient Galileans: “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”¹⁴

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for Special Occasions (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xlii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Deuteronomy 26:1-11, 17-20 (KJV).*

³ *St. John 6:26-35 (KJV).*

⁴ *St. John 6:35 (KJV).*

⁵ *St. Luke 12:16-21.*

⁶ *St. John 6:1-14.*

⁷ *St. John 6:26 (RSV).*

⁸ *St. John 6:27 (RSV).*

⁹ *St. John 6:48, 50-51 (RSV).*

¹⁰ *An alternative name for ancient Shechem.*

¹¹ *St. John 4:14 (RSV).*

¹² *Psalms 105:39b (MCV).*

¹³ *Psalms 116:12 (MCV).*

¹⁴ *St. John 6:35 (KJV).*

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