

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B' (Harvest Thanksgiving)
10 October 2021
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

Parents are often heard telling their children to say “thank you.” Of course, children know nothing of social norms and attitudes and take whatever comes to them without question; being polite isn't an instinct we are born with. Thus when parents insist their children say, “thank you,” parents are teaching their children to be thankful. Saying the words makes some sort of connection inside their heads, and little by little, with every repetition, children learn what it is to be thankful. But this is an attitude that must always be relearned and honed; you and I need to be continually reminded what it is to be thankful, and we, too, must remind ourselves to say “thank you” and to cultivate a style of life in which we remember to be deliberately thankful.

What's more, saying “thank you” reminds us to shift the focus away from ourselves and onto God—which means it's also a cautionary phrase for folks like you and me who can so easily become bored and blasé about our faith. Of course all of today's trappings—these lovely decorations, this harvest *mise-en-scène*—help to get us into a thankful mood. But what happens when all of it is gone, when we don't have the helpful props to back us up? If we're not careful, we'll lapse into an attitude of entitlement and expectation. You see, there's a danger that all of the Thanksgiving paraphernalia, including our sumptuous turkey dinners, is a trap—or at least a convenient distraction. Kneeling in our pew and giving thanks for whomever and whatever we are grateful, or serving enough food for an army to a few family and friends, aren't very deep ways to express thanks, genuine though they may be. A true expression of thanks is shown by getting up out of our pews and our dining rooms and going out into the world ready to give without counting the cost or what we're going to get out of it.

And let's not fool ourselves: all of us keep a mental abacus, a figurative ledger of debts and credits. And I suspect most of us believe that we are owed far more than we owe. Or to put it another way, and much more bluntly, we say “please” far more than we say “thanks.”

You don't need to think very hard to come up with examples. We all want the best government services, especially when it comes to health care and education, but we also want our personal income taxes to remain low. We want beautiful clothes and household goods, but we don't want to pay people to make them in this country because that would mean the retail prices would be too high. We want the church to offer a wide a variety of programmes and events, for the buildings to be well-tended and clean and the services appropriately decorous, but we don't think the onus is on us to pay for them.

Even our attitude to the Church can be one of “please.” We want it to be there, to be attentive, to be responsive. We *want* it to be all of those things. Once again, to put it bluntly, we turn to the Church when it’s convenient for us, or when there’s some crisis at hand, or when we’re in the mood. But there are lots of times when being involved with the Church—to say nothing of *giving* to it—isn’t convenient, when there’s no difficulty we need help surmounting, when we’re not in the mood. Yet when we turn to it and say “please,” we expect a generous response—no matter what.

I need hardly tell you that this is *not* the model for a faithful and fruitful life. Just as we need continually to remind ourselves to say “thank you” if we are going to become generous people, we need to remind ourselves that we actually *need* the Church if we are going to become disciples not only in word, but in deed. For when we recognize that we need the Church, we begin to break free of the need to keep those mental ledgers obsessively. And when this happens, we find that we are giving without expecting anything in return, except—maybe—the satisfaction that comes from true generosity. We become walking examples not only of thanksgiving, but more importantly, of gratitude.

Our annual stewardship campaign will begin in the coming weeks. This campaign will give each of us the opportunity to put our faith into action by making a pledge to this parish we all love so much. Each of us has the opportunity to move from an attitude of “please” to an attitude of “thank you.” Each of us has the opportunity to show our gratitude to this place by making a financial commitment to it.

Of course, each of us has to consider seriously what we can realistically give. No one is expected to go into penury for the sake of the Church. But as you think and pray about what your pledge might be, think about your priorities. And be honest. Where does St. Mark’s fall in this list? If it’s not at the top, or at least near the top, why? Maybe it’s because you haven’t made a commitment to it; you haven’t done something that is a tangible expression of gratitude. After all, isn’t it true that the things we value are the things we have made a commitment to?

And for heaven’s sake, don’t say, “I can only give a modest amount. It won’t make any difference.” Of course it will make a difference—and not primarily to St. Mark’s, but to you as you discover that when you make a pledge, when you remind yourself of how when you give, you realize how much you have to be thankful for. And that is a real occasion for joy.

It simply isn’t true that “God will provide” without any response from us, because God *has* provided in the persons of you and me. We are here to build God’s kingdom, and, like it or not, this is a costly venture. It won’t happen by some sort of *deus ex machina*, or by hoping that someone else will do it, or through plain good fortune. It will only happen through the tireless and unstinting generosity of you and of me.

So this Thanksgiving let us take the opportunity to say, “thank you” instead of “please.” Let us remember that our first—and only— duty is to the sovereign Lord of

all things. And let us know that in giving ourselves to him whose service is perfect freedom is our joy complete.