



A Thanksgiving Homily

The Rev. David R. Graham

Adwaita Hermitage

27 November 2008

THANKSGIVING DAY

St. George's Windsor

George J. Elvey, 1859

Come, ye thankful people, come,
Raise the song of harvest-home;
All is safely gathered in,
Ere the winter storms begin;
God, our Maker doth provide
For our wants to be supplied;
Come to God's own temple come,
Raise the song of harvest-home.

All the world is God's own field,
Fruit unto his praise to yield;
Wheat and tares together sown,
Unto joy or sorrow grown:
First the blade and then the ear,
Then the full corn shall appear:
Grant, O harvest Lord, that we
Wholesome grain and pure may be.

For the Lord our God shall come,
And shall take His harvest home;
From His field shall in that day
All offenses purge away;
Give his angels charge at last
In the fire the tares to cast,
But the fruitful ears to store
In His garner evermore.

Even so, Lord, quickly come
To thy final harvest-home;
Gather thou thy people in,
Free from sorrow, free from sin;
There, forever purified,
In thy presence to abide:
Come, with all thine angels come,
Raise the glorious harvest-home.

Henry Alford, 1844



Thanksgiving Sunday, Claremont, California

In 1946, my sister (age one) and I (age three) were brought to live in Claremont, California by our parents, a fine church organist, admired teacher and self-righteous Presbyterian clergyman, and his ambitious wife. Claremont was a college town, deemed "the Cambridge of the West Coast," and supported one Congregational Church and one Roman Catholic.

He had been engaged as youth minister of this Congregational Church, which bore the name The Claremont Church (heavy on the "The"). Today it goes by the name Claremont United Church of Christ and belongs to the denomination in which I accepted ordination and that now includes Jeremiah Wright ... and not I.

Soon he was popular with the young people and unpopular with their elders, especially the senior clergy and certain professors at Pomona College. He announced his intention to start a second Protestant church in town. Begged not to and threatened with marginalization if he did, he did and he was.

The congregation, organized under auspices of the National Council of Community Churches, remained small, started but never completed his plans, expelled him for argumentative behavior and finally conveyed the property to an Hispanic revivalist organization.

All through he was a popular professor of philosophy at a junior college in Orange County and retired there after decades of appreciated service.

In his later years he mounted numerous locally popular musical events at his home, which included a decent Baldwin organ and Steinway piano.

His wife deserted him when convinced her ambitions could not be satisfied by him.

Soon after this second Protestant church appeared in Claremont, a flock of them did. The old days of the Pomona College-Scripps College *falange*, manifesting as The Claremont Church-The City of Claremont, were "in the deep bosom of the [orange groves] buried." Turned out not all the professors were Congregationalists ... or Protestants ... or Christians.

To memorialize the old days, anticipate new and convene a religious tone to a National Holiday, the clergy of Claremont resolved to foregather their flocks once a year on Thanksgiving Sunday to sing and listen together as one Church in Christ, one City in Concord and one Nation under God.

The clergy of the Roman Catholic Church declined to participate or were not invited, I do not know which. There were no rabbis or synagogues in Claremont in those years. Or Negroes. Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Islam were on some scholars' minds, one presumes, but not others'. Buddhism and Communism interested not inconsequential minorities, the one because of the Beatniks and the other because of, well, the Beatniks again, the Fabians, the Bolsheviks and of course and the academic faculties. None of these religions and heresies of religions

participated *per se* in the Thanksgiving Sunday foregathering of Claremont's churches.

Because of this annual foregathering, Thanksgiving Sunday was my second favorite day of the year, after All Saints Sunday and All Saints Day. Much more than Christmas or Easter. I did not care much for Thanksgiving Day because the family was neither happy nor thankful and did not get along.

The Thanksgiving Sunday Service of Worship occurred at Big Bridges Auditorium on the Pomona College campus, the largest proscenium in town, suitable for the Los Angeles or any other Philharmonic Orchestra fully to mount an organ symphony.

This Sunday, and including its succeeding National Holiday weekday, always felt and still feels to me like an extension of All Saints Day. It is. Perhaps better, an elaboration of the Feast of All Saints. In any case, not only are they related, All Saints and Thanksgiving are integral, they belong together existentially as one.

Holiday And Holy Day

A Holiday is a Holy Day, informally contracted by common usage to one word.

The Thanksgiving Holy Day is not, as often assumed, of American origin. Thanksgiving is an Ecclesial Holy Day marking the English Harvest Festival that long antedates the naming of the Americas. It is a movable

feast whose date can vary between villages according to the season. During their Harvest Thanksgiving, farmers and gardeners decorate the church with their finest produce, making it their harvest-home.

The purpose is two-fold:

- * to thank God for the new harvest and its ingathering as sustenance for the winter months, and
- * to remind people, in terms of the agricultural metaphor, of the ambiguity of secular life and the certainty of its eschatological consummation in the Spiritual Community, the Church.

The famous Thanksgiving Hymn and the Tune associated with it are by Englishmen living in England. The hymn was written to adorn the Feast of the Harvest Festival, the Harvest Thanksgiving.

The correlation of this Hymn and Tune with Pilgrim forebears -- actually, Separatist Anglicans -- of Plimoth Colony in North America, gathering in their Summer harvest against their Winter needs, is appropriate symbolically but anachronistic literally. Hymn and Tune appeared over 200 years after the establishment of Plimoth Colony and on the side of the Atlantic and in the ecclesial body from which and from whom the Pilgrims sought refuge.

Additionally, it is likely such Thanksgivings as the Pilgrims early offered God included at least as much gratitude for their not having been

slaughtered for food by natives, whose savagery was quickly noted, as for their having food to survive earth's Winter rest.

However, the power of this Hymn and Tune to express meaning inside the agricultural harvest, and especially to highlight its value as eschatological metaphor, transcends time and place. Accordingly, Hymn and Tune are appropriate to any Harvest Thanksgiving Holy Day church or state wishes to establish for expressing gratitude, self-identification or instruction by means of them.

Recalling Thanksgiving by Pilgrim forebears with this Hymn and Tune is anachronistic but it works spiritually on a grand scale. These masterpieces of the Christian Liturgical Year enrich expression of the depth and durability of All Saints Day by evoking the power and meaning of life from start to finish, forward and upward.

The Agricultural Metaphor In The Harvest Thanksgiving

Civilization rests on:

- ★ six inches of top soil;
- ★ willingness to cooperate in cultivating that top soil to raise food;
- ★ willingness to cooperate in distributing the food thus cultivated sufficiently to engender continued cultivation;
- ★ willingness to cooperate in cultivating the functions of spirit (religion, culture and morality) liberated by continued cultivation of food;
- ★ willingness to cooperate in protecting the structures of cooperation thus built out and up and defending them against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

Civilization is all five of these necessities bound together in dynamic, goal-driven union. Will and top soil are the foundation of civilization. Cooperation is the first course resting on top of that foundation. Transportation is the second course. Reproduction is the third. All manner of technology and language are the walls, windows and moveables. Defense is the roof, enclosure and gate.

At the Harvest Festival the Christian Liturgical Year proclaims this array of essential truth embodied in the necessities of ordinary life.

But it proclaims more than this. At the Harvest Festival the Christian Liturgical Year also discovers a metaphor for transcendent meaning in common agricultural experience.

- * It notes the parallel of in-gathering of earthly food to sustain the requirements of human, plant and animal life on the one hand with God's provision of spiritual food to attract and sustain the consummation of The Church and Her members, the Spiritual Community, on the other.
- * It notes the parallel fate of weeds and ears harvested of corn on the one hand with pretend and actual members of the Church on the other.
- * It notes from the presence together of weeds and crop plants in the same field a parallel experience in life generally: that good impulses and bad reside in the same heart and hearts and give their characteristic effect through the thoughts, words and deeds of the same persons and groups.
- * It notes the true nature of the world as God's dominion, his playground, his workplace: farm, office, shop and field of battle.

- * It notes a salient truth regarding the power of evil: that ordinary humans, though they must resist it, can neither overcome nor overthrow it; only the very pure of heart -- "angels" -- can destroy the power of evil.

- * It notes the actual and only goal of piety, which is purity of heart. Love, prayer, good deeds, worship, study, reflection, singing sacred songs -- all of these have one outcome in view: worthiness to be in the Presence of Holiness by virtue of uprooting downward-dragging impulses to achieve a pure heart, the *sine qua non* of the estate of bliss in Holiness.

- * It notes the raising of food and the laying it up for use during the months when the earth must rest as palpable experience of the Glory of God producing and preserving the grandeur of life in the Spiritual Community created through His Christ, His tangible presence as the God-man Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ, the pivot and goal of history.

The Emergence Of spirit In Spirit

The Harvest Thanksgiving shows that whereas life is ambiguous and therefore prone to tragedy, Eternal Life is unambiguous and therefore full of bliss. The intensity and constancy of that bliss, for those gathered into the Spirit of God by the Christ, exceeds immeasurably those of the joy earned in the great labor of planting, tending, harvesting, in-gathering and preserving for future need life's agricultural necessities, although that joy does anticipate fragmentarily the bliss of Eternal Life.

Each person's world, and the universe as a whole, points ahead of and above itself to the goal, in the sense of purpose, *telos*, of spirit and of history. This goal, already present to ordinary experience in anticipation and fragment of great power, is the Spiritual Community of God, or, to use symbolic language of the scripture and theology, Jerusalem the Bride of Yahweh and The Church the Bride of Jesus the Christ.

The Church as Spiritual Community is actual soteriological power wherever the name of Jesus of Nazareth is invoked as the Christ of God and History.

The Harvest Thanksgiving is the time and place in the Christian Liturgical Year where the deep gratitude of the Church for the power and presence of the Christ, comprising the consummation of life and history through Him in the Spirit of God, is expressed in terms of the agricultural metaphor.



The Harvest Thanksgiving of the Christian Liturgical Year expresses the ineffable bliss characterizing the emergence of spirit in Spirit.

A.M.D.G.