

Thanksgiving – November 23, 2006

A few weeks ago the local newspaper ran a front page story about a bed discovered in an Allegheny County Warehouse. What makes the bed worthy of a front page story is the belief that President Abraham Lincoln once slept on it. When I read that story, my reaction was “Now that is an old bed.” And then, if you will excuse me, I wondered about mattress mites and bed bugs. There must be some old critters there.

Well, today as a nation we stand in the midst of and enter into something even older, namely—Thanksgiving. The first Thanksgiving goes back to 1621 and the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, who were ever so grateful for an abundant harvest. In 1789 President George Washington issued a Thanksgiving Day Proclamation to commemorate that first pilgrim celebration.

The Proclamation read:

Wheras: It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of the Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly implore his favor.

Whereas: Both the houses of Congress have, by their joint committee, requested one ‘to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peacefully to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.’”

Now, therefore, I do recommend next, to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be, that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for his kind care and protection of the people of this country.

The third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, decided to discontinue this practice of Thanksgiving because he saw it as a “Kingly practice.” The feast was nonetheless celebrated by individual states without the national appeal. Then in 1828 Sarah Hale, the author of the poem “Mary Had a Little Lamb” began lobbying for the reinstatement of Thanksgiving as a national holiday. She wrote letters and arranged meetings with national leaders but to no avail. Finally, in 1863, President Lincoln listened to her plea and formally declared the fourth Thursday of November to be “National Thanksgiving Day. This day was subsequently ratified by the U.S. Congress in 1941.

This storied history of Thanksgiving as a national feast is quite revealing in at least three ways. First, it confirms the statement of Sirach in today’s first reading—that God has done wondrous things on earth. Second, it corroborates the belief told by St. Paul in today’s second reading that we are to thank God “always.” Finally, history demonstrates that gratitude is not easily or willingly expressed. In the gospel ten lepers are healed, but only one, a Samaritan, returns to give thanks. For some, thanksgiving is elusive and not a consideration or practice. And what a shame that is because all that we are and all that we have as a nation and as individuals originates from God. As the old song goes, “All good gifts surround us, are sent from heaven above.”

We are to be a nation and people of Thanksgiving, not just on the fourth Thursday of November, but every day and in the words of St. Paul “always.” In prayer to almighty God and conversation and correspondence with one another we need to say “thanks.”

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One of the clearest and most cogent manifestations of genuine gratitude occurs at the cemetery when a veteran is buried. Typically, representatives of the respective armed forces attend and at the conclusion of the prayers, they fold the flag, as taps is played in the background, and then they present the flag to the next of kin with these words, "On behalf of the President of the United States, and a grateful nation, I present to you this flag for your loved one's service to the country." It may have been fifty years ago that this person served, but gratitude is expressed because when it comes to thanksgiving and the expression of gratitude, there is no expiration date. It is never too late to say thanks, for it is a sentiment for all times and places

Happy Thanksgiving.