

Saint Andrew's Church

Lake Worth, Florida

Saturday after Thanksgiving Day [November 24, 2007]

Canon Richard T. Nolan

A Positive Thanksgiving In Troubled Times

[a revision/blending of previous Thanksgiving sermons]

All of us could make a list of troubles that afflict us, whether directly or indirectly. From soured personal relationships, problematic job and health issues to the many battles within our national borders to international wars, we may sometimes feel overwhelmed by pervasive difficulties. It would seem that the celebration of Thanksgiving must have a negative aspect to it.

In our home, we watch less television news and now receive only one daily newspaper. This is not to escape from reality, but to more easily sort through information we need to have as responsible citizens and set aside excessive, unconstructive “news.”

It appears that most people in our nation, feeling battered by their own circumstances plus too much other disconcerting information are seeking a combination of a little solace and ongoing, uplifting celebrations. The quest for one carnival after another with a touch of relief may involve one or more addictions to professional sports, short-lived popular music, present-day fashion, celebrities' lives, the perennial holiday cycle, shopping, chemical abuses, and the like. Much of this search can be viewed as trying to satisfy the need to be entertained, now the overall American spirituality. Regrettably, if churches are to attract a large membership today, they must entertain effectively with moments of solace and occasions of celebration.

The Thanksgiving frenzy many just experienced now gives way immediately to the Christmas whirl and thereafter to other special days, religious and secular. It is possible to bounce from one season or activity to another, non-stop. In fact, this lifestyle has become so engrained that many would sink into a depression with too great a pause!

In a struggle with this rut, a wealthy individual told us that he and his wife just have to go on periodic cruises abroad, in order to have a break from the almost daily fundraisers and social banquets during our southeast Florida “Season.” When asked why they just did not stay home and relax when they felt like it, he said that people are terribly offended if you miss *their* event if you are in town – and *they know* when you are in town! The solution for some degree of solace is to get away.

Indeed, times are troubled. But they always have been, and they always will be - until the Creator fully establishes what Scripture calls the “Kingdom of God” – that perfected existence God is still making. That could happen within minutes or after many more millennia have passed.

In the meantime, what is the answer for you and for me? Must we accept the inevitability of being tossed about by troubles – remedied superficially by temporary band aids and rare moments of solace that quickly lose effectiveness? Must we wait for God to do something about it for us? Or, is there something we can do to redeem our own circumstances and thereby be saved from idols that assault us with the opposites of what they promise? Where is significant relief for us *now*?

We cannot choose everything that happens to us, and we cannot remedy all the world's troubles, but we *can* choose to a large extent how we respond: *as grumpy, exhausted, frenzied individuals or as a fellowship - scarred, coping, and refreshed together to carry on.* The clue is embedded within many Scriptural passages, including tonight's reading.

You and I need to choose more carefully than just the ordinary bread needed for physical sustenance. For a redeemed, saved, and everlasting life that begins here and now, we need nourishment from Christ's words. “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” Jesus is saying that the very way *he* lives is what humanity needs for a genuine, balanced life. He found meaning, purpose, and stability by way of his unique relationship with the Father - a relationship of intimate, mutual trust and affection. His chosen lifestyle, although also troubled with personal difficulties, was such that he was able to focus chiefly on living in a genuine fellowship with the one true God, his authentic neighbors, and himself. His severe challenges were dealt with within *this* reality.

If you will, recall these familiar words of Jesus: "Come unto me all ye that are travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." I do not pretend to know how it happens, but when people gather to share the symbolic, blessed Bread, refreshment can occur among willing recipients. A rest and ease from weariness, from sorrow, needless guilt, and even religious pretentiousness, can rescue us from despair and frenzy. We experience the Spirit to cope with adversity. A sense of peaceful security and a quieting of life's inevitable storms flow into our hearts and minds. This is not a magic that controls us; we must be open to God's rejuvenating power. Moreover, all this occurs around shared Bread - the ancient symbol of nourishment, social bonding, hospitality, respect, and concern; Bread -the primary Christian symbol of the life-giving power of God, the Way lived and taught by the Risen Christ.

You and I gather this evening as we embrace the distinctively Christian meanings of the Thanksgiving holiday; we gather to give thanks and to be fed with extraordinary Bread: Bread not to stare at, idolize, or invest with magical qualities. As the staple of genuine living, we consume holy bread, and we partake of consecrated wine, that we may live gracefully and fully in our present circumstances. In this grace-filled liturgical act, we follow Christ; we affirm who we are: *each of us a unique, named child of God united in this fellowship*. We are renewed in our common baptismal identity, and in our daily lives we live out who we are, now and then blundering and troubled as we follow him. We celebrate our God-given identity that anchors and supports us during life's transitions and unexpected moments, whether turbulent or peaceful. We do this so that our lives may become increasingly in harmony with his.

Time and again, particularly at Thanksgiving, you and I are encouraged to step back from our usual position in the world - to let go of the typical responses that our culture conditions us to have and to move forward toward God's purposes. As we do, we are to be thankful that God is "beside us to guide us." We should take stock of all that we have, as we shall express shortly in "A Litany of Thanksgiving."

We have been given another year, and we are invited to look at the reality of our lives and to know that despite the tensions, disappointments, and other troubles of the year now ending, you and I *can* be thankful and positive in this imperfect world; we can experience love – especially in this sacred place on this holy occasion. Christ has invited us into this life, *his* life, freed from all sorts of hunger and thirst; it is entirely our choice as individuals whether to accept his invitation.

The Reading - John 6:25-35

When the crowd found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."