

“A man’s a man for a’ that ...”

Happy Thanksgiving!

The scriptures that were read today were taken from the lectionary, and I have to admit that they left me scratching my head a bit, wondering how they fit into Thanksgiving. I finally clued in to the fact that the lectionary might have been developed by non-Canadians, so our Thanksgiving date might not even be on their radar with regard to the choice of readings.

But by then it was too late – I was determined to make it work somehow.

Up until that point I was left asking myself if I was missing something. They do both involve feasts or meals of some sort, but that seemed a little thin as an explanation. Is there something about these passages that fits with the idea of Thanksgiving that I just can’t see?

Happy Thanksgiving!

That’s not a greeting I grew up with. We city-bred, Scots Catholics knew nothing of harvest festivals and pumpkin pie. I never even tasted pumpkin pie until I attended a Boy Scout banquet when I was maybe 11 or 12. Pumpkin pie ... I don’t think I was able to finish mine. I dislike the stuff to this day.

So was I missing something in these passages because I wasn’t immersed enough in the holiday and all the nuances around it?

Thanksgiving wasn’t a part of our religious life, nor was it a part of our cultural patterns. We were Scots; ex-pats; a people with our own strong traditions, that didn’t include this particular celebration.

I remember, when I was a young teen, reading a quote from someone in a National Geographic magazine with regard to the shipbuilding area around Glasgow and the River Clyde. The person being quoted, a member of the British aristocracy, described the working class of the region as “... Clydeside communists that don’t understand the meaning of the word ‘deference’ ...”.

... a reference to the expectation that persons of the “lower classes” should show deference and respect to their “betters”.

What *he* failed to understand, of course, is that Clydeside communists understood the meaning, and the implications, of the word “deference” only too well, and held it in contempt. They were heirs to a long tradition of respect for the common person.

Some of the expression of that tradition can be found in the poetry of Robert Burns. He was born in 1759, and is probably the best loved voice of that part of Scotland’s national character.

Some of his lines have made their way into common speech, or are at least recognizable by most in the English-speaking world :

“... the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley ...”

“... man’s inhumanity to man ...”

“... should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind, should auld acquaintance be forgot and days o’ auld Lang Syne”.

My own favourite quotes from Burns are taken from two separate poems.

The first is from a poem entitled “To a louse ... upon seeing one on a lady’s bonnet, at church”. It describes the spectacle of a louse parading around on the brim of a woman’s hat while she sits very self-importantly in church, and the others sitting around her enjoying a laugh or two at her expense.

The poem ends with the following prayer, of sorts :

“O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion ...”

If I can translate that into a more prosaic form, it would read something like :

“Oh, would some power give us the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us. It would free us from many blunders and foolish notions about ourselves.”

The second quote is taken from two sections of a poem entitled : “A man’s a man for a’ that”, and these will definitely require a little explanation. The recurring line “... for a’ that ...” I think can usually best be translated as “... in spite of it all ...”.

The first part of the quote goes like this :

“...The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The Man's the gowd for a' that.”

The image here, is that of a gold coin that is stamped with an impression to indicate its worth. If I take a loonie, I can see that it is worth one dollar, because it says so right on it.

Burns' poem highlights the fact that the rank, or status, that we give to someone is like the stamp on the coin that indicates its worth. It might be worth a pound, or a guinea. But a golden coin isn't worth 'X' because the stamp on it says so ... it has an inherent worth by virtue of the gold used to cast the coin.

“...The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The Man's the gold in spite of it all.”

The second part of the quote comes from the end of the poem, and before reading it, I'll translate one line (I think the rest is comprehensible to North American English speakers with my earlier translation of “for a' that”). The line is “...Shall bear the gree ...”, and this basically means something that will carry the day, or be victorious :

“...Then let us pray that come it may,
(As come it will for a' that,)
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth,
Shall bear the gree, an' a' that.
For a' that, an' a' that,
It's coming yet for a' that,
That Man to Man, the world o'er,
Shall brithers be for a' that.”

My apologies for his 18th century, male-dominated, speech.

This kind of stuff was the backdrop to much of my growing up years; a sense that each of us had inherent worth, regardless of our state in life. And while I grew up with a healthy sense of respect for authority, I didn't grow up with a sense that someone in authority was necessarily 'better' than me.

“... those Clydeside communists that don't understand the meaning of the word 'deference' ...” - My father loved that quote.

As Clydeside communists who had emigrated to the Niagara Region, we reveled in Labour Day parades at the beginning of September, and enjoyed the Niagara Region's Grape and Wine Festival at the end of September.

We looked forward to Hallowe'en at the end of October, and missed the festivities around the bonfires, and fireworks, and effigies of Guy Fawkes on the 5th of November.

We embraced Christmas and even went to midnight Mass ... sometimes.

We made sure that the entire family was in the house on New Year's eve so that we could pass from one year to the next, together.

But we didn't celebrate Thanksgiving. I suppose that was mostly because it was more of a religious holiday, and we weren't particularly looking to adopt any new cultural practices. I'm also pretty sure my mother probably had no idea how to cook a turkey ...

So what's the link between Burns and Thanksgiving? Why am I boring you with recitations of passages in an old lowland scots dialect? Well, in fact, the link is a tenuous one at best, and I think is actually more relevant to the idea of covenant, which, of course, is included in the celebration of Thanksgiving.

But let me try to draw a link to two sections of the scriptural passages that were read earlier.

First, from Psalm 23 :

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

This is definitely a passage that resonates with a melancholy Scot : even though I might be passing through the valley of death, there is a sense of comfort and thankfulness that God is somehow present, even in that context.

The line I noted earlier : "... man's inhumanity to man ..." is taken from a poem entitled "Man was made to mourn", in which Burns decries our capacity for cruelty towards each other. He is particularly scornful of those in places of power who use their position to dominate rather than assist.

He finishes the poem with these verses :

"O Death! the poor man's dearest friend,
The kindest and the best!
Welcome the hour my aged limbs
Are laid with thee at rest!
The great, the wealthy fear thy blow
From pomp and pleasure torn;
But, oh! a blest relief for those
That weary-laden mourn!"

And that's a bit of a segue to the passage that was read from Matthew 22:

“ “⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

This is the kind of inclusive, welcoming image of the kingdom of God that most of us are probably most comfortable with.

Everyone is welcome; the good, the bad, the ugly. No one is refused admittance, and the wedding hall is filled with guests.

Unfortunately, the parable doesn't stop there, though I wish it had. It goes on :

“¹¹ ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.’”

There is an implicit covenant at play here – if you accept an invitation to a wedding feast (if you agree to participate in the social contract contained in the invitation), certain things are expected of you.

This covenant goes both ways : something is expected of the person making the invitation (a meal, and an evening of celebration); and something is expected of the person who is invited (at the very least, a certain level of respect, as shown by his/her behaviour and dress).

Mind you, where God is the one issuing the invitation, it seems a little presumptuous to demand something in return – it's not quite a tit for tat relationship. We don't enter into *this* covenant by saying, "OK, I'll do this for you, God, on condition that you do that for me".¹

But the covenant *is* somehow a mutual thing. It's not just a legal contract between two business parties. It is an acceptance of a way of being in relationship.

Over the next few weeks, we'll explore this notion of covenant. Most of the exploration will be taken on by a couple of outside speakers, though Joe will also have a run at it.

We'll all be encouraged to reflect on what covenant means, and on how *we* are each individually expected to respect our own covenant with God and with each other.

Let me just confess that when I entered into *my* covenant with God, I'm sure I brought all of my baggage with me. I read my Bible through the eyes of a Scot raised on Burns, by a Clydeside communist; I relate to the people around me, using all the patterns that were developed in my family of origin – some of them healthy patterns - some of them not so much; my understanding of God is coloured by my childhood in the Catholic church, my early adult life in evangelical churches, and by my decades in the Mennonite Church.

And, of course, each of you has your own baggage that colours how you understand how you relate to God and to those around you.

Each of us has a sense of where we fit in; what this covenant has demanded of us, and what it has given us.

And today, we want to celebrate the things our covenant has given us, and to be thankful for that.

Pumpkin pie, an' a' that.