Thanksgiving, October 7: Deuteronomy 8:1–10

Other Lessons: Psalm 65; Philippians 4:6–20 (1 Timothy 2:1–4); Luke 17:11–19

Although traditionally the “Day of Thanksgiving” is not part of the historic liturgy (like Christmas, Easter, Pentecost) and it’s not even considered a “feast/festival” (like the commemoration of the saints, Reformation day), and in our hymnal, it’s categorized as an “occasion” (along with anniversary of a congregation or Christian education), to give thanks is, nevertheless, part and parcel of the Christian experience and life, and thus part and parcel of what we do even here in the church and liturgy. The liturgy is filled with words of praise and thanksgiving to our God who richly and abundantly blesses us with all his good gifts for our body and soul.

Of course no Christian in their right mind will deny and refuse to give thanks to God. Even unbelievers today, especially around this time of the year, if you ask them if they are thankful for what they have, most of them will say that they are thankful, although they only mean the gifts and not the giver. So the general attitude of thanksgiving is there. But our text for the Day of Thanksgiving today in Deuteronomy 8 enjoins the people of God to more than a mere attitude. The key word here is to “remember”, and not just a mental exercise, but a life, a way of living that keeps God and his works in mind at all times. For us today it is very easy to be consumed by the busyness of life so that while we do not forget, yet at the same time we do not take the time to reflect and remember and thus reorient our lives accordingly. Because ultimately, it is for our good, as verse 1 says, so we may live, truly living.

The name “Deuteronomy” is from the Greek meaning “second law”. Not that it is a different or new law from Moses, but that Moses is reminding the people once again the law and statutes of God as before they enter the promised land after 40 years of wandering. He reminds them because these people do not remember, not because they have memory problem, but that they fail to continue to live according to the grace given them. Now this second generation is about to cross the Jordan to take the land and Moses warns them so that they would not follow their parent’s errors and unbelief, so that, ultimately, they may live and not die.

That’s what happened to the first generation that came out of Egypt. They all died in the wilderness, many of them died IN their sins, in their rebellion and unbelief. They were a thankless bunch because they did not think they needed God. They always wanted independence from God. This is what one pastor calls the sin of “self-sufficiency” or “self-dependence”, a sin that affects us all, whether in the wilderness with nothing or in a big city with everything. These people forget again and again what God has done for them, how he punishes evil and cares for his own people. God sent the 10 plagues, he divided the Red Sea, he provides a pillar of cloud and fire as protection and light, he gives them food and water, but these people do not remember. And so they live as though God does not love and care for them. They only see their present condition, which was as Moses says in verse 2, a testing from God to see their hearts, and they become discouraged. Not only do they not give thanks to God, but they reject him as an enemy.

The sin of “self-sufficiency” makes us think that we can live apart from God, that we are capable to sustaining our lives. We may need a little bit of help here or there, but for the most part we are not that humble, we still think that we are in control of our lives and the things that surround us. What folly is this! What did we do to bring ourselves into this world, into this life? And what can you bring from this world and life into the next? What is truly under your control in this life? How much control do you actually have?

And lest we think we are so different from the people in the wilderness because they truly had nothing so that they must depend on God in every way, while we can do anything to provide for ourselves as though we are not totally dependent on God in every way, let us not forget that all things come from God, and we are all at the mercy of God.

So here Moses briefly recounts (to help them remember!) their blessings. They hungered but that was to let them know that they do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. For forty years they lived on manna (and quail), which came by the word of God. They didn’t work for it, they didn’t buy it, it came freely. And it came by the word of God, but more importantly, they are truly living in both body and spirit because they have the word and promise of God. For life does not consist of the body only, the biology, but we have both body and spirit, both of which require constant nourishment. The people were sustained because God was with them.

Moses then mentions the clothing and sandals that did not wear out. Pretty amazing considering how things today wear out so quickly (which gives us good excuse to buy new cloths and toys). But this too shows how God continued to look after them for forty years. So long as they have God with them, they were not lacking. Yes, they had difficult times. Yes, they encountered enemies. Yes, they were tempted in many ways. But God never broke his promises, he was always there to discipline them, to teach them, to finally bring them to the promised land.

The whole point for them to remember is for them to continue to live in God, that is to say, to continue to expect God’s providence in their lives. If God consistently provides for them for 40 years, will he then suddenly stop? And that’s the lesson for us too, because today these same gifts have been given to us, but in a greater and better way because God gives us the Christ. As we heard back in August in John 6, the people in the wilderness ate the heavenly food and yet still died, but Jesus has come as the bread of heaven to give us eternal life. This is what he means when he instituted the Holy Meal, when he says “this do in remembrance of me”. It is not merely to remember in the mind, but by repeating, by continually receiving him for the forgiveness of sins and salvation and eternal life, we are then actively remembering with our very life.

And we remember too our baptism. That is where God clothed us with the robe of righteousness that does not wear out. A true treasure from above that cannot be destroyed, a gift that we own right now, which cannot be taken away. The word of promise is there. The word that enlivens us. Just like the people of God in the wilderness who suffered no swelling feet, no nakedness, no cold, or exposure to the elements because they were clothed, so also we remain in Christ so that we may be protected from the attacks of the devil. That is to say, we remain in repentance and the forgiveness of sin of Christ. For the ultimate goal of the devil is not to make you do sin, but that you remain in sin without repentance, without coming back to the cross of Christ, forgetting the good news of eternal salvation.

Indeed, in these words, we are reminded that life is not easy. Maybe not as bad as the wilderness for 40 years straight, but there are plenty of difficulties in our own lives to bewilder us. God, through Moses, wants us to remember all these things so that we may continually look to him and expect his blessings. And when we align our lives rightly according to his word and promises, then the only result is praise and thanksgiving, a life that lives in the confidence of God’s love and care and protection.

This is the Thanksgiving long weekend, and I am glad that we have it, mainly because of the statutory holiday. But it does give us an opportunity in our busy lives to remember to give thanks. Proper thanksgiving is to remember. It is a way of living that remembers daily what God has done, what he does now, and what he has promised to do for you. And so as we enjoy this long weekend, as we celebrate and rejoice, we remember all these wonderful gifts that God has bestowed upon us, so that we continue to live in his grace and love.