

## *A Spirit of Thanksgiving*

Christ the King Sunday – November 23, 2003

### Scripture Background Study

#### Scripture Passages (NRSV)

##### Psalm 105:1-6

- <sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,  
make known his deeds among the peoples.  
<sup>2</sup>Sing to him, sing praises to him;  
tell of all his wonderful works.  
<sup>3</sup>Glory in his holy name;  
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.  
<sup>4</sup>Seek the LORD and his strength;  
seek his presence continually.  
<sup>5</sup>Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,  
<sup>6</sup>O offspring of his servant Abraham,  
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

*Mark 8:6-7; Matthew 11:25; John 11:41-42; Matthew 26:26-28*  
[at the distribution of the loaves and fishes] Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. . . . [Jesus thanks his Father] At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father for such was your gracious will." . . . [at the raising of Lazarus] So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." . . . [at the Last Supper] While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

*This is the second part of our brief series on gratitude and thanksgiving.*

#### Shouting Thanksgiving

Last week, from Psalm 100, we learned that true praise, true worship, and true thanksgiving are always offered with understanding and knowledge; we must know who it is that we praise. Otherwise, we could thank some "false god," as the Israelites did from time to time. It is *God* who is steadfastly faithful to us all. It is the *Lord God* to whom our praise and thanksgiving should be directed! It is "he who made us and not we ourselves" (Psalm 100:3).

#### Raising Lazarus

Today's NT scripture is a collage of sorts, meant to illustrate that Jesus offered thanks to God, his Father, on all occasions. The passage from John is from the story of Lazarus, wherein Jesus offers to God a rather odd thanksgiving.

Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, live in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. They are all very close to Jesus, so when Lazarus falls ill, friends travel to tell Jesus so he can come to Bethany and heal Lazarus. But when Jesus is told about his friend, he dawdles around, delaying his trip to Bethany by a couple of days! When Jesus finally arrives, Lazarus has already died. In fact, he has been dead for four days! Jesus tries to comfort Mary, telling her that Lazarus will "rise again." She, of course, thinks Jesus is speaking of the last days when all will be resurrected, but he is not. Instead, Jesus asks to be taken to Lazarus' tomb. Though he is warned that Lazarus will smell bad by now, Jesus commands that the tomb be opened. Then, Jesus offers thanks to God – thanks that God has heard him! As I said, this is puzzling, for surely Jesus knows that the Father hears him. However, we learn that Jesus has expressed the thanksgiving aloud so that all those gathered outside the tomb will hear Jesus and have faith that God sent him. After offering thanks, Jesus commands Lazarus to come out . . . and he does, still wrapped in the burial cloths. The resuscitated Lazarus returns to his loved ones!

Like the psalmist, Jesus uses the giving of thanks to tell others of God's power and his mighty acts!

From today's psalm, we learn that our thanksgiving is not to be offered in silence, nor is it to be heard only by God. Rather, our praise and thanksgiving are to be shouted out for all the world to hear. The psalmist writes, "Remember the wonderful works he has done . . . make known his deeds among the peoples . . . tell of all his wonderful works." Less eloquently put, the people of God are to remember what God has done, be thankful for it, and tell others. For the Israelites, this remembering centered upon God's deliverance of them from bondage in Egypt. Through Moses, he had rescued them from the Egyptians and had guided them to the Promised Land. The stories about God's mighty acts were to be told and retold to all who would listen, so that everyone – all peoples – would come to know and to worship the Lord God. For then, the thanksgiving of all the nations would be properly directed.

### Eucharist

In Acts, we are told that after Pentecost the disciples "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). Ever since, the "breaking of bread" by Christians has continued and been variously called the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, and the Eucharist.

The Greek word for the giving of thanks and praise is *eucharisteo*, hence the name "Eucharist." Being a devout Jew, Jesus would have given thanks before every meal, acknowledging dependence upon God's gifts. Thus, before distributing the loaves and fishes to feed thousands miraculously, Jesus offers thanks to God. On the eve of his own death, before breaking bread and sharing the cup with his disciples, Jesus offers thanks. These were no perfunctory mumblings. Indeed, understanding the significance of the Last Supper, early Christian communities developed special prayers of thanksgiving in connection with their own breaking of bread. This thanksgiving was so powerfully bound up with the breaking of bread that Christians came to refer to the celebrations as the *eucharistia*.

In the UMC, we often recite what we call "The Great Thanksgiving" when we celebrate Communion. In our book of worship, there is even a Great Thanksgiving for each season in the church calendar! Thanks be to God!

I am reminded of the story of Rahab. When Joshua was about to begin the conquest of Canaan, Rahab, a prostitute living in the city wall of Jericho, sheltered Joshua's spies and even lied to her own king. Why? Because she had *heard* what God had done! She and other Canaanites had been told how God had given the Israelites the land and how he had "dried up the water of the Red Sea" (see Joshua 2). She had *heard* and she had placed her trust in the God who could do such things. Ever after, the Jews held Rahab in high esteem; she is even listed in Jesus' genealogy!<sup>1</sup> All this because the Israelites made "known God's deeds among the peoples" (Psalm 105:1)

### *A life of thanksgiving*

In his book, *Prayer: finding the heart's true home*, Richard Foster writes, "Jesus was the ultimate grateful person. The signature written across his heart was the prayer 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth'" (Matthew 11:25). Jesus was of one heart and mind with the psalmist who wrote "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart" (Psalm 9:1) and with Paul who wrote "I thank God for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Romans 1:8) and with the writer of Hebrews, "let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (13:15).

As in all things, we are called to be Christ-like. We must allow ourselves to be drawn more often into the praise and thanksgiving of God- the adoration of God! Foster reminds us of Augustine's phrase, "God thirsts to be thirsted after" and writes "Our God is not made of stone . . . like the proud mother who is thrilled to receive a wilted bouquet of dandelions from her child, so God celebrates our feeble expressions of gratitude." Let's not pretend that even feeble expressions of thanks are easy. Living every day in a spirit of thanksgiving does not come naturally to us; there is much in life that wants to crowd out any sense of gratitude. Nonetheless, as we begin our journey of prayer here at St. Andrew, we can seek to grow in our ability to see and to experience God and all his goodness.

<sup>1</sup>The memories of Rahab and what she had done were so cherished by the Jews that legends built up around her. One legend was that she went on to marry Joshua himself. Another remembered her as one of the four most beautiful women who ever lived!

## Daily Bible Readings

(the larger passages from which today's scripture readings were taken)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Day 1 Psalm 105</b>	<b>Day 2 Mark 8:1-10 Jesus feeds 4000</b>
<b>Day 3 Matthew 11:20-12:14 Jesus' conflict with the kingdom of this age (in contrast to the kingdom of God)</b>	<b>Day 4 John 11:1-44 The death of Lazarus and his raising by Jesus</b>
<b>Day 5 Matthew 26:17-29 The last supper</b>	<b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b>

## Sermon Notes

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### *Want to learn more about the Bible and what it means for you?*

Scott Engle's new Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. We meet in Wesley Hall (the 'old' sanctuary) at 9:30. It is a great chance to make new friends and learn more about the Bible and the Christian faith. More than 150 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

**Please join us next week!**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When writing about our prayers of adoration, Richard Foster notes that there are two sides of the "adoration coin": praise and thanksgiving. This is the biblical perspective. But in my own life, I've very often thanked people for one thing or another without ever imagining that I'm praising them - much less adoring them. Discuss why our praise of God and our expressions of thanks to him go hand in hand. What binds praise and gratitude together?
2. Not only is our thanks to God built upon a foundation of praise, it is to be accompanied by our proclamation: making known the deeds of God and telling of his wonderful works, as the psalmist put it. Perhaps it is a little like a child who opens a Christmas present only to find it is the one thing . . . the one thing . . . she really wanted. Her heart bursts with joy and excitement as she runs to embrace the gift-giver. Then she can't wait to run outside and share her excitement with all her friends. Do you find yourself truly excited about the many blessings you've been given by God? If not, what can we do to capture that sense of joy and excitement . . . an excitement and enthusiasm for God that is so consuming that we couldn't help but tell others about it. Our spirit of thanksgiving would just come bursting out of us! Perhaps, we need to look beyond what God has "done for us lately" to the larger gift of being "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9). Such a gift is not meant to be hoarded; it is meant to be shared.