

Thanksgiving and repentance:

a sermon praught on the First Sunday of Advent

1 December 2002

at St. Mary's, Castleton,

by the Rev'd Gerald W. Keucher, Controller of New York
Diocese



I'M DELIGHTED TO BE WITH YOU THIS MORNING, and I'm very grateful to Fr. Major for inviting me to preach this morning. Fr. Walsted and I will be with you most of the day today, since we've also been invited to participate in this afternoon's Evensong and Benediction. It's safe for you to come back, however, as I will not be occupying this space again.

This weekend we have experienced the sequence we normally have: Thanksgiving Day on Thursday and the First Sunday of Advent a few days later. It's a sequence with which we are familiar, but even after years of the sequence, it may be hard to get accustomed to the two days so close together, because Thanksgiving Day and the First Sunday of Advent seem to pull our attention in wildly different directions.

Thanksgiving calls us to look at our lives with gratitude to God for the undeniable good things we all have. We're not all as rich or as beautiful or as untroubled as we might want to be, but all of us have — despite the problems there may be — all of us have a great deal for which to be thankful. Thanksgiving Day calls us to see how our cup overflows with material and spiritual blessings, and the Day calls us to give thanks to God Who is the Author of every good and perfect gift that we have received.

The First Sunday of Advent calls us to look at our lives from another perspective. Advent is concerned principally with the gap that always exists between what our lives *are* and what we know God has said they *ought* to be.

Perhaps you are struggling with a serious illness; perhaps there's serious chronic illness in one of your family members.

Perhaps you live with the pain and anger of relationships that have been broken to pieces by divorce, death or alienation.

Maybe you are living with the hurt of parents or children who have utterly disappointed you.

Maybe you are living with the frustrations of a job you find limiting, a marriage that is much less than ideal, or economic insecurity.

We feel the gap between our brokenness and the wholeness God promises.

And even if everything in your life outside you is fine, every single one of us knows that we are not as kind and faithful as we could be. We're not as thoughtful and generous as we want to be. We're not as openhearted and patient as we know God wants us to be. Unless we have completely blinded ourselves so that we resolutely never practice self-examination, we *must* feel the gap between the way we treat others and the way God wants us to treat others, which is the way we really deep down *want* to live.

And if we still erroneously think that we can ignore injustice, oppression, strife among cultures, ignorance and lawlessness around the world, surely we see now that there is no protection from the devastating and horrific consequences of those ills.

Sometimes the reason for the gap between how things are and how God — and we — would like them to be is our own personal responsibility. Far more often, I think, the terrible messes we blindly fall into are tied to the whole sorry history of human pride and greed. The economic injustice, the social inequities, the crude shallowness of our culture — all these are far bigger than we are, even though we all participate in them.

Advent tells us that the gap is unbridgeable — that is to say, that *we* cannot make the world what it ought to be. We can only view those permanently painful parts of our lives and the effects of human sin in the world and cry, “O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down!” Only *God* can fix what we have broken. Only *God* can heal what we have wounded. Only *God* can raise what we have killed.

These may be hard thoughts for us. We’ve probably been taught to look on the bright side, to walk on the sunny side of the street, and to imagine that every day in every way we’re getting better and better. We’ve been told — and it’s part of the truth — that it’s better to see the glass as half full rather than half-empty. I say it’s part of the truth, because our glass *does* have uncounted good things in it, and we are blind and churlish if we do not practice the lessons of Thanksgiving Day.

But Advent is a time to recognize the painful emptiness of our glass as well, a time to acknowledge how we ache to see it brimming over with the love and peace and joy that we know God has promised, but which always seem just out of reach. In order to see our true situation, we need to be able to express this longing as well as our thanksgiving.

Genuine thanksgiving for what God has given us, and an urgent longing for what God has promised are really two parts of the same experience of being Christian and being human. On the day before Thanksgiving some years ago, when I was doing hospital chaplaincy, I visited a wing of post-operative patients who would be spending the holiday in the hospital. People said over and over again, “Well, I’m grateful. Things could be a lot worse.” And in every case this was true. They were authentically grateful, and things could have been much, much worse. But the next thing most of them said after a little pause was, “Oh, well. What’re you going to do.” That second remark was a way of trying to speak about their yearning for a full glass of health even as they acknowledged with genuine gratitude the measure of health they did have.

The hymn that means Thanksgiving for us expresses both our gratitude and our yearning. “Come, ye thankful people, come,” it begins, and it hits the Thanksgiving Day themes of gratitude and trust: “God, our Maker, doth provide for our wants to be supplied.”

But then the hymn moves from thanksgiving for food and material benefits to a prayer for our own growth in God: “Grant, O harvest Lord, that we wholesome grain and pure may be.”

It is not enough to say thank you for what we have, though that it where we must begin every day. We need to respond to what God has poured into our glass by working to make ourselves responsible recipients of God's benefits. That's part of what Advent is about — "Cast away the works of darkness, O ye children of the day." God has made us children of the day through water and the Holy Spirit. We therefore have His strength to help us cast away the impurities that make our glass opaque and muddy the waters in it.

The example of God giving Himself for us draws forth from us the desire to be like that generous, self-giving God. And our desire to be like the God we see in Jesus prepares us for what is about to happen. Echoing, or anticipating, the classic Advent hymn "O come, O come, Emmanuel," the classic Thanksgiving hymn ends, "Even so, Lord, quickly come to thy final harvest-home; gather thou thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin; there for ever purified, in thy presence to abide."

That's what we're longing for — to live for ever purified in God's own presence, where there can be no separation from God and therefore no sorrow.

Being thankful for what God has given us cannot be separated from longing for all God's promises to be fulfilled. Only when we are truly grateful for "our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life" do we begin to see truly our longing for the final revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to prepare ourselves to meet Him whenever that day comes.

In the meantime, with St. Paul, I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus. You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you guiltless in the day of the Lord.

God is faithful, St. Paul continues, — and *that* is our experience, our promise, and our hope. With daily gratitude for God's faithfulness we can face the rest of our days. And with eager expectation of God's continued faithfulness we can prepare to meet Him when He comes to take us home.

Now may the Sun of righteousness shine upon you and scatter the darkness from before your path. And may all the blessings of this season of hope and expectation be yours.