

In Nomine Iesu

Thanksgiving Day 2023 Give thanks to the Founder of the Feast – John 7:37-39

“On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (John 7:37-39)

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Dear believers in Christ:

Today is Thanksgiving, a day set aside by the Congress of the United States for the people of our nation to give thanks to God. It is not a part of the historic worship of the Christian Church, but we do observe it as good and right. It comes at the end of the church year, for this coming Sunday is the Last Sunday after Trinity.

The Feast of Tabernacles, *Sukkot* in Hebrew, which we see celebrated in the text, was the last feast of Israel’s church year. And although it was not an exact counterpart of Thanksgiving, there are similarities. It was a harvest festival, as is our Thanksgiving. It was also a time to implore God to bless His people in the year to come, as we also do at Thanksgiving. However, since this feast is not nearly as prominently mentioned in the New Testament, we are not familiar with it. But the imagery of the feast was not lost on the people who that day heard Jesus cry out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” (vv. 37-38) The significance of Jesus’ words was clear to everyone present. For, as John records in the verses that follow, some of them immediately began to say, “Truly this is the Prophet.’ Others said, ‘This is the Christ.’” (vv. 40-41) But others, those who represented the religious establishment of the day, said, “Will the Christ come out of Galilee?” (v. 41)

Let us fill in the details of the Feast of Tabernacles. In the late fall the people of Israel made for themselves booths or shelters of tree branches in preparation for the week-long Feast of Tabernacles. From the first day of the feast until its last day, the ancient custom was that they were to dwell in the booths or shelters as if they had no houses, as if they still dwelt in the wilderness, being led onward by Moses to the promised land. The feast, coming as it did at the end of Israel’s agricultural year, was a feast of harvest and thanksgiving for the past year as well as one of petition and trust in God for the year to come. In other words, it was like a combination of our Thanksgiving Day, with its theme of thanks to God for all the earthly blessings of the past year, and the last Sundays of the church year that deal with death, judgment and everlasting life. The feast reminded the faithful of Him who gives the fruits of the earth; and of greater truths, that is, that the end of the world would one day come when God would gather in all people living and dead, and separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats. So, the feast was one of joy for blessings received in the past and of solemnity in view of what was to come.

Before the final sacrifice of the festive week the faithful again came out of their leafy tents in the still hot fall afternoon and gathered in the temple courtyards. Meanwhile one priest would bring up a vessel of water from the pool of Siloam in the lower city and another priest a vessel of wine from the temple offerings. The wine would be poured into a receptacle on one side of the altar in token of the harvest God had just given. The water would be poured into a receptacle on the other side in the hope of the water God would send to nourish the harvest for the following year. As this was done all the rest of the priests chanted aloud the great *Hallel*, that is, Psalms 113 through 118. As they did so all the worshipers responded with the cry of "*Hallelu-Jah*", that is, "Praise the LORD." Imagine then the scene in the great courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem as hundreds of priests intoned each verse of these six psalms while thousands and thousands of the people answered each verse with the mighty chorus of "*Hallelu-Jah*". The temple courts must have fairly shook with their praises.

It was only when they came to the last of these psalms, Psalm 118, that this pattern would be broken. It would be broken at three places. At the first and then at the last verse – which are the same – the people would respond to the priests by repeating what the priests had just sung, the familiar words, "Oh, give thanks unto the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever." The third place where the pattern was different, which came just before the psalm's end, the people would also repeat the verse chanted by the priests. The verse is very familiar to us: "Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity." (Psalm 118:25) I have mentioned this before, but you may be saying to yourselves, "Wait, that is not familiar." And you are right. It may not be so familiar to you, not, that is, in English. But it is in Hebrew. For the words, "save now" in Hebrew are "*hoshi'anna*", Hosanna. "Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity."

Imagine the scene at this great Thanksgiving Day in Israel, water and wine have been poured upon the altar, the voice of the huge crowd has just echoed mightily through the temple, "Hosanna – Save us now," and then, just moments later, to conclude the psalm, another mighty, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever." The echo dies and silence falls over the great temple courtyard with only the slight rustle of palm leaves in the upraised hands of the worshipers. Imagine as a single, strong voice breaks the silence and cries out for all to hear, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." And all eyes turned to Jesus.

Here, dear Thanksgiving worshipers of the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, here, dear sons and daughters of all the faithful of Israel who have gone before us, all the faithful who emerged from catacombs and forests after the great persecutions of Rome singing the words of the *Te Deum Laudamus*, "We praise You, O God; we acknowledge You to be the Lord," here is the very same living water Jesus offered to the Samaritan woman at the well. Here is the water of which He said, "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become to him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." (John 4:14) Here is the water that bore up Noah and his family in the ark and saved them. Here is the water that baptized all Israel as Moses parted the sea and they walked on dry land at the directing of his staff through its midst. Here is the water that covered Jonah while he was in the belly of the fish and protected him until he too

was delivered safely to the shore. Here is the life-giving water that nourished Eden before the world knew evil. Here is the pure, saving water of God's grace and mercy.

Here is the water of life that Christ Jesus our good and gracious Savior commanded be brought to people of every nation so that they might know His salvation. So that they might stand on the last day before the throne of God and, together with faithful Israel, sing, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever." Here is the water poured out on each of us in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Here is the gracious, regenerating water of life that flows from Jesus Christ, the pure, clear Fountain of Israel, the crucified and arisen, to all who hear and believe.

Jesus is the Fountain of life that springs up in our soul so that we never thirst again. He stands among us today, even as He did in the temple courtyard 2000 years ago. He stands among us, calling to us in the preaching of His word, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." He is the reason we come here. He gives form and purpose to all that is done in this place. For He alone is our Savior. In Him there is forgiveness of every sin, and life everlasting. For all the good things of the past year we give thanks to God this day. But especially for Him, who gave His life for us, we give thanks this day to our great God and Father, who so loved the world. "Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever."
Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria