

Now Thank We All Our God!

As we approach Thanksgiving on November 26, I am reminded of the wonderful hymn by Martin Rinkart, "Now Thank We All Our God", written in 1636. Martin Rinkart was ministering in the city of Eilenburg during the horrific time of the Thirty Years War. Eilenburg was surrounded and besieged by the Swedish army, and starvation was affecting everyone. Eventually one by one the pastors in the city died, along with thousands of other, leaving Rev. Rinkart as the only pastor to see to the spiritual needs of the people. It is believed that he went out of the city to meet with the Swedes, who respected him in their negotiations, and the siege was eventually lifted. By end of the siege he was doing fifty funerals a day and there's one account that says that he conducted 4,480 funerals in all during that period. It's hard to imagine what it would have been like in a situation like that.

In the midst of such darkness and despair, Rev. Rinkart, wrote these words:

"Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices; who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way, With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."

"Oh, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us; And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed;

And guard us through all ills in this world, till the next!"

"All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given, The Son, and Him Who reigns with Them in highest Heaven, The one eternal God, Whom earth and Heav'n adore;

For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore."

The first Thanksgiving emerged from a crisis of the spirit. For some, the Holy Spirit was not moving in the Church of England. For them, "separating" seemed to be the way to let the spirit move in their lives. So, these "Separatists" lived simply, devoting their lives to serving the poor. The Pilgrims that we remember with our Thanksgiving Day once fasted and ate little as a way of self-discipline. They did not pig out like a lot of us do. The voyage which they took to distant shores was a pilgrimage --a religious journey for freedom. Today we continue to experience that religious freedom and for that we can indeed be grateful. Considers the frigid weather in Cape Code at this time of year, one wonders about the wisdom of landing there in November. Actually, the trip was planned for landing on the shores of Virginia, no small mistake in winter. They soon sought out the shelter of the bay and Plymouth Rock, but things were still unbearable there. Their plight was desperate; eighteen women denied themselves food so that their children could eat. Thirteen of them died that winter. Half of the 102 Pilgrims died of malnourishment, disease, and exposure. Only about 30 of the 54 who survived were over the age of 16 years old. Along with 90 Indians, these survivors came together for a harvest festival that lasted three days. They expressed their gratitude which was felt so profoundly after surviving the winter and a summer drought as well. Profound gratitude often grows out of scarcity.

While we pause to give thanks with friends and family, let us give thanks for the things that we have taken for granted. Imagine yourself living on the streets, struggling for food, fearing what will happen to you. Imagine losing all that gives you comfort and pleasure. Imagine yourself almost 400 years ago in the Seventeenth Century with the Pilgrims in Plymouth fighting the cold without shelter or adequate food. Then you begin to realize just how far we have come, just how good life really is, just how much we each have to be thankful for at this time in history and just how careful we need to be that in our comfort that we do not ever forget God, who is with us always even in the midst of what ever pain we are facing. We can be thankful to God for all the blessings that He and His presence have brought in our lives. May we sing out, with Re. Rinkart, *"Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices, Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices!"*

Grace & Peace,
Rev. Daniel Randall