



A Grateful Heart

by Jonathan Aitken

AMERICANS ARE GRATEFUL PEOPLE. More so than in any other country I can think of, the giving and saying of thanks is a vital ingredient in the history, heritage, culture, and day-to-day life of the United States. Why?

Visiting various cities in the fourth week of November last fall, I was again struck by the warmth and universality of the preparations for Thanksgiving. Almost everyone seemed to be making travel plans, cooking plans, and family plans for this uniquely American celebration. As a visitor I have always found Thanksgiving a particularly attractive symbol of the national character. The event rises above the commercialism of Christmas. It avoids the parades and parochialism of nationalistic or ethnic festivals such as St. Patrick's Day in New York. Nobody feels excluded from it on grounds of race or religion. It is a loving, simple, and warm-hearted occasion, happily focused on family life.

Yet although Thanksgiving is secular in its designation as a public holiday, its origins are rooted in the spiritual practices of the Pilgrim Fathers. When the founders of the Plymouth colony held their first thanksgiving supper in December 1621, they were expressing gratitude for a successful harvest and the ending of a difficult year. Gratitude to whom? The original thanksgiving would have been surprised by the question and unhesitating in their answer, for they were resolutely God-fearing and God-grateful people.

Contemporary Americans are more varied in their expressions of gratitude. They are profuse in their politeness of thanking everyone for everything. Go to a greetings card shop to ask for a thank-you card and you discover that every imaginable relationship is catered to. To my boss, my boyfriend, my

dog walker, my doctor, my manicurist, our sales department, our paper boy, and even our editor (!) are just a few of the occupations that can be thanked via Hallmark and other personalized card manufacturers. However, there seems to be a presumption that all this gratitude follows some good result—perhaps a bonus from the boss, neatly trimmed cuticles from the manicurist, and so on. But what happens when things go wrong—as they do in real life? This is where God re-enters the picture, although not always easily.

William Law, the author of the 17th-century spiritual classic *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, offered this advice to his readers:

If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness they would tell you to make it a rule to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever



seeming calamity befalls you, if you can thank and praise God for it you turn it into a blessing.

Now this is a tough call. When we are knocked sideways by one of life's mega-misfortunes, ranging from a malignant tumor to a financial meltdown, most of us mortals are more likely to be angry with God than grateful to Him. That was my initial reaction during my personal career catastrophe, when I fell from rising cabinet minister to jailed convict.

At one point in these self-inflicted disasters a friend recommended that I should seek guidance from an abbot who was renowned as a spiritual counselor. When I met this venerable figure in his monastery he was hard of hearing so I had to raise my voice to summarize my problems, which consisted of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy, and jail. When I had finished reciting this litany of woes the old sage leaned forward and asked in his quavering voice: "Have you tried thanking God for them?" Giving him a punch on the nose was the instant temptation from which I had to restrain myself!

In retrospect I have come to see that the monk was right. Today I am grateful because the pain was eventually followed by the gain of a far more fulfilled life. Signposts to such a result can be found in spiritual writings down the millennia. "Give thanks in all circumstances," advised St. Paul (I Thessalonians 5:24). The author of the world's best-selling Christian book after the Bible, Thomas à Kempis, wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*, "If thou wilt that I should be in the light blessed be thou. And if thou wilt that I should be in the darkness blessed be thou. Light and darkness, life and death praise ye the Lord."

Maybe one has to be as holy as Thomas à Kempis, William Law, and St. Paul to follow this path of godly gratitude to the full. Yet at some point on life's spiritual journey the light dawns for many of us that even in the worst of times the old saying "count your blessings" is a truth well honored.

JUST BEFORE THANKSGIVING I was in Washington, D.C., so I exercised my country membership in a Georgetown prayer group that has been meeting each week for more than 30 years. Its members, whose friendship has meant much to me, are now men of mature years. Our combined dramas have encompassed more than a fair share of life's peaks and valleys. Bereavements, breakdowns, divorces, suicides, Watergate, prison, serious illness, family estrangements, and financial disasters have been part of our

combined tapestry of experiences, although well tempered by joys and successes. On this particular eve-of-Thanksgiving morning we talked and prayed about gratitude. The overwhelming consensus was that each and every one of us had a multitude of reasons for being grateful to God.

Our group's combined wisdom of hindsight should be far more widely accepted as spiritual foresight. Gratitude is a seriously underestimated virtue, pivotal to both prayer and Bible study. For it is important to thank God for blessings received before we put

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our requests to Him. Those supplications, although right as an expression of dependence on God, often have a touch of self-centeredness about them. But the backward-looking prayer of thanksgiving is quite selfless, a disinterested act of godly love.

God appreciates disinterested thanks. We know this from a story in Luke's Gospel (17: 11-19). It relates how 10 men were miraculously healed of leprosy, but only one of them came back to thank their healer.

"Were not all 10 cleansed, where are the other nine?" asked Jesus, saying to the grateful one, "Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole."

This valedictory blessing draws an intriguing distinction between health and wholeness. We go to the gym for the former. True wholeness, which includes that vital ingredient of gratitude, comes from God. The Pilgrim Fathers understood this when they celebrated the first Thanksgiving. They would have agreed with their contemporary, George Herbert (1593-1633):

*Lord thou hast given so much to me;
Give one thing more—a grateful heart.* ❁

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