

What Is The Good Life?

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All countries have their national holidays. The English have “Empire Day” - a challenge to memory! The Virgin Islands have “Organic Act Day” - a challenge to imagination! Wisconsin invented “Income Tax Day”, but not surprisingly it failed to ignite the popular imagination. The same was true when a National Day of Thanksgiving was first proclaimed. Not until 1941 did all states recognize the 4th Thursday in November. The first Thanksgiving wasn’t really about family at all. There were 140 people present and most of them were Indians. And the accepted beverage at that celebration was not milk but beer served even to the children. But whatever your choice of beverage this Thanksgiving I hope you and your family had a wonderful day.

Of course there is no Thanksgiving Day in Scotland not because the Scots have nothing to be thankful for. For example there’s ...No there is no Thanksgiving because not even a Scot who had imbibed a dram too many could ever believe that his forbearers were pilgrims. Horse thieves? Perhaps! But pilgrims never! Thanksgiving is a uniquely American holiday, more universal than Hannukah and less commercial than Christmas. It does seem to be the good life. The traditional scene is familiar to all - the family joyfully gathered around a table laden with turkey and cranberry sauce, sweet potato and pumpkin pie. And as I look around this morning I think some of you stayed at the table a bit too long. For example there’s! But though Thanksgiving is now over the question still remains what is the good life? To answer that let’s look at how 4 very different communities in the past would have answered it.

Our first stop is back to the 19th century with the Cherokee Indians who are found in Tennessee. They live in tents as their forefathers (and foremothers) have done for centuries. It’s a simple life unencumbered with things. Ask the young warriors about their occupation and they will speak of hunting. They may add something like this: “We kill animals only when we need life - and sometimes they kill us. But for the most part we are at peace with the bear, the eagle and the buffalo. And speaking of buffalo we heard a strange story of a paleface who killed many buffalo even though he had no need of them. He was called “Buffalo Bill” and we think he must have been sick. For we are at one with the forest, the animals and the Great Spirit of the mountains. For us the good life is found in harmony with nature and the world of the great spirit. As one of your poets has said: “I come into the peace of wild things/ who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water/ And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time/I rest in the grace of the world, and am free”. The good life is being at peace with the world with the world around us.

Now leave the world of the Cherokee and go back another 300 years to Presbyterian Geneva. A cloth manufacturer is holding forth: “Two important things happened recently. The theologians decided that renting money is no different from renting houses. So we have done away with the old taboo of usury - lending money with interest - admittedly the scriptures frequently condemn it - and so we no longer have to turn to the Florentines for capital. In Geneva here big business was once prostitution but now it is manufacturing. Of course the common people have to work long hours, but it is still quite a moral improvement, don’t you think? Remember Satan finds some evil for *idle* hands to do. For us the good life consists in the opportunity to work hard, to better oneself and to provide a happier future for our children”. The good life is about a rising standard of living. The reformer John Calvin taught us that. A learned man but I would leave him off your party list.

Now go back 1500 years and our third port of call is a rather modest house in Antioch, in Syria - that troubled land where the Christian faith began. A small group have gathered early on the Lord’s Day to break bread in memory of a simple Nazarene who told stories in the small fishing towns around Lake Galilee. He wasn’t a freedom fighter though his country was occupied by the Romans. He wasn’t a rabbi. He had only been to the local school. He was a layman who said that God’s table was open to everyone even those who broke the Law or were diseased. That was contrary to what Moses and the Patriarchs had taught for 2,000 yrs. A holy God in love with unholy people. Ridiculous! Later his followers would call him the Messiah though he angrily rejected that title and said it came from Satan. He didn’t claim to be God which would have been unthinkable for any Jew, but merely to speak for God and to God.

Filled with ideas from Geneva we ask this small group of believers in the 1st century about their standard of living. “Ah” they say “We don’t take much interest in all that now. Once they tried out a common treasury in Jerusalem but it didn’t last long. One of our more controversial preachers, called Paul, started a Poor Fund to which some of our Jesus communities have contributed most generously. However the bottom line is that the End of the Age is near and so we live simply until our Jesus returns. The good life for us is bodily sufficiency and fellowship with like minded folk.

And our final call on this imaginative journey back into history is a dusty road near the small border town of Bethlehem. It is long before a famous baby was born there. The year is 800 BC, and a peasant farmer is leading a donkey laden with two baskets of wheat to the village. He is following the ancient tradition of bartering goods, in this case wheat for cloth. It shocked our farmer to hear of a neighbour who actually sold his ancestral land to a stranger when the Torah spoke of a Jubilee Year when all land must revert to the family who owned it. A landless people would never emerge even if some did better in the market place than others. The good life for our peasant farmer are the ties of family to the old homestead. Differing views about the good life from different centuries.

Thanksgiving Week is about many things. It's about a little boy, called John Billington, who pried open a keg of gunpowder and nearly blew the Mayflower right out of the water. It is about Pilgrim John Winthrop, whose puritanism allowed him and his beloved Margaret to think lovingly of each other only between 5pm and 6pm Mondays to Fridays. Happy hour!! It's about that first fearful winter when courageous souls laid to rest half their number in unmarked graves lest the Indians guess their plight, and only 4 women in the small company would survive the winter rigors. It's about unforgettable memories from the past which somehow suffuse our present. "Land where my fathers died/ Land of the pilgrims pride/ From every mountain side/ Let freedom ring".

Underneath the season of Thanksgiving there is a common search for the good life. And each of those four communities affirm a different ideal.

The Cherokee are the predecessors of the different communes which have grown up throughout the world. The clan, the village market, the feudal manor was a society which had a place for everyone - for the landowner but also for the village idiot. The elderly weren't shunted off into geriatric villages since life comes to us through the sound of children playing and the next generation growing up. Now in the world's richest country only the very rich can afford when the poor have always had - a right to die at home surrounded by one's family and then being laid to rest with love and tears in the local kirkyard. Is that the good life?

Geneva represents Wall Street and the world of business where fortunes can be made by guessing rather than labour. But what is the true value of a culture which focuses largely on profits in a society where multitudes of children no longer have bedtime stories or sit around the dinner table ? Was Jesus wrong when the only god he ever identified was Mammon? I recently read a book by T.R Reid (a Washington Post journalist and head of its London bureau) which said that this great country offers the best health care in the world to those who can pay, but lets thousands who are not well off die of treatable diseases. Why are loneliness, divorce and guns more prevalent in the United States than in any other western society? Shouldn't the public argument not be about whether government is too large or small, but which does most for the most vulnerable? That's not politics. That's religion - at least it is according to my Bible.

The Nazarene sect in Antioch reflects Billy Graham's remark: "I despair of the world. Our only hope is to wait for Christ's second coming". For conservative evangelicals the good life lies in personal piety and adherence to traditional belief". Unfortunately many people have tried that and didn't find it the key to the good life.

And finally the peasant farmer going to the market in Bethlehem represents the little businessman who discovers that he can't compete with bewildering change, with the Mall and the new Information age. He feels he is losing something precious in the passing of the old ways, for not all of life's treasures are set forth in a balance sheet. The past is somehow important to our well-being.

This week throughout "the land of the pilgrim's pride" the dream of the good life flourished again. It was a dream which found its roots in an old covenant community nurtured on the memory of an exodus and a Sinai which cared for the weak as well as the strong, a unique community which provided sustenance for the widow, for the orphan and most amazingly of all for "the stranger within thy gates" - a community which realized that the foundation of the good life is surely found in *people* not possessions, in *relationships* not just goods, in *the life of the spirit* not just the traffic of the marketplace.

And since this is my first Thanksgiving with you allow me to add one personal note. For Dorene part of the good life has been singing in the choir. For me part of the good life has been not singing in the choir. But for us both it is Cindy, Brian, Austin Ken and Dan - and above all you the people of this congregation who have made our lives richer and our days happier. As we have moved into this area you have helped to make life good for us and what more can we say at the end of this week but say with the hymnwriter: "Now thank we all our God/ With heart and hands and voices/ Who wondrous things hath done/ In whom this world rejoices// Who from our mother's arms/ Hath blessed us on our way/ With countless gifts of love/ And still is ours today".

Amen