

Message for Thanksgiving Sunday – October 11, 2020

Psalm 147

Now thank we all our God,
With heart, and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In Whom His world rejoices;
Who from our mother's arms
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

Many of you no doubt recognize this as the first verse of “Now thank we all our God” which is one of the greatest hymns of thanksgiving even though it is not usually sung as a Thanksgiving Sunday hymn. This hymn happens to be one of my favourites and I have been thinking about it a lot lately, if only because of the story behind it and the times that we are now living through.

This hymn was written by a Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinckart who lived in Germany four hundred years ago. The world in which Rinckart lived and ministered was a very dangerous one since Europe was caught up in “The Thirty Years War”. As its name suggests, this war lasted for an almost mind-boggling thirty years. The war was a power struggle between the Protestants and Roman Catholics and at one point or another involved virtually every country in Western Europe. The death and destruction was widespread and to make things even worse, there were also years of famine and numerous plagues as well; indeed it is estimated that altogether the fighting, disease and starvation killed somewhere between 4.5 and 8 million people.

This was the world that Rinckart lived and ministered in. The city where he lived, Eilenburg, was not immune; in fact at one point he had up to fifty burials in a single day and yet, despite it all, Rinckart never lost his faith in God or his belief that life is good. Indeed so deep was this

conviction that, inspired by the words of the 147th Psalm, he wrote the words of this wonderful hymn of thanksgiving. As grim as life may have been, he still firmly believed that there was still so much to be thankful for.

It would be stretching the point far too far to say that we are living through our own “Thirty Years War” but nevertheless we are living through a very challenging time. When I look back I am almost amazed at how fast things changed. Early in the year we had news reports about a new virus that had emerged in China, but at the time that didn’t seem to have anything to do with us. We then saw what was happening in Europe and especially in Italy and Spain but once again we weren’t too concerned since it seemed to be so far away and didn’t have anything to do with us. Then almost overnight everything changed. Even then though many if not most of us didn’t really ‘get it’; remember the shock when it was announced that the March Break would be lengthened from one week to three? I suspect that most of us would have been dumbfounded if we had been told how we would still be living all these months later. The pandemic has had such a huge impact on our daily lives impacting such as how we shop, socialize with one another and work. Looking back so many of the activities and events that we would have normally enjoyed were cancelled; we can think of such as the Canada Day celebration, the Steam Era and the Fair for example. When we look ahead there is no real end in sight either; so many of the activities that help make Christmas ‘Christmas’ for example will not be held this year.

The pandemic is certainly having an impact on the church as well. When we re-open we will not be able to enjoy so many of the activities that we took for granted in the past such as fellowship times after worship and pot-luck dinners. The pandemic will even have an impact when we gather once again to worship with the seating being restricted. While the worship service will be basically the same format as what we are used to, such as anthems and hymn singing are now forbidden. This is the world that we now live in and then we come to this weekend.

This of course is the long Thanksgiving weekend and once again the pandemic is having a negative impact on what we normally do. Can we

gather to celebrate as families? Should we? This is the long weekend when our hearts are supposed to be filled with gratitude, but are they?

As Rinckart reminds us, even at the worst of times there are still reasons to give thanks. Yes, we are encountering some shortages but in a world where so many people are hungry and even starving, we have a super abundance of food and other material goods. Indeed I don't think that many people living in a Third World country or even those-in-need in our own community would have much sympathy for us if we complain that such as the paper towel shelves are empty! In a world where even the most basic of health care is almost unheard of for so many, we have our health system. To be sure it is most certainly under strain with the backlog of Covid test results, surgeries and other tests being postponed but it is still functioning, in no small part because of those who are on the "front lines" risking their health and even their lives caring for others. In a world where so many lack shelter and clothing, we have both. There is also the physical world around us too with its goodness and beauty, especially perhaps during this time of year with the harvest and as the leaves change colour. Yes, there is the climate change crisis but even so we do live in a world full of beauty and goodness. To this we can add such as our families and friends; all the people who mean so much to us and bring so much joy, pleasure and meaning to our lives.

If we give it some thought, this list of things to be thankful for could go on and on. To be sure we are living in a challenging time and perhaps we really don't feel all that much gratitude right now but even so ... there is still so much for which we can be thankful for. Like Rinckart before us, we can and should say "Now thank we all our God" and that of course, making the effort to thank our God and to acknowledge our ultimate dependence upon him is what this weekend is all about. That is the point of this little story.

A new soul arrived in heaven and St. Peter gave him a tour. They walked side-by-side into one large building which was filled with angels. St. Peter stopped in front of the first section and said, 'This is the Receiving Section.' The soul looked and noticed how busy it was with so many angels sorting out requests from people from all over the world. Then they

continued the tour arriving at the second section. St. Peter told the soul, 'This is the Packaging and Delivery Section. Here the blessings that the people asked for are processed and delivered.' The soul noted again how busy it was. Finally at the farthest corner of the building they stopped at a very small station. To the new arrival's surprise only one angel was seated there and he was doing nothing. 'This is the Acknowledgment Section,' said Peter. 'How is it that? Is there no work here?' the soul asked. 'It is so sad,' St. Peter sighed. 'After people receive the blessings they asked for, very few can be bothered to send back their acknowledgements.'

Even in times such as these there is still so much to be grateful for. Even in times such as these we should still acknowledge our dependence upon God. Even in times such as these, we need to and in fact should celebrate Thanksgiving as we best see fit and give thanks for our blessings.

Life was not easy for Martin Rinckart and yet, despite this or even perhaps because of this, he wrote the words of one of the greatest hymns of thanksgiving of all time. Inspired by the words of the 147th Psalm, his great hymn reminds us that even at the worst of times there is still so much to be grateful for. I hope that you read this scripture passage before reading this message but whether you did or not, I would encourage you to do so now since it captures what this day is all about, beginning and ending as it does with "Praise the Lord!" or, as it can also be translated from the original Hebrew, "Hallelujah!"

Thanksgiving Prayer 2020

Gracious God, this Thanksgiving is unlike any other we have ever experienced before. With all of the restrictions impacting our daily lives, so much now seems to be so different and so wrong. Even now, caught up in the 'second wave', life seems to be so uncertain and even dangerous.

We must confess that as we celebrate Thanksgiving this year we may not feel the same sense of gratefulness and gratitude that we usually do

but even so, help us we pray to remember the many blessings we do have and experience.

We give you thanks for the wondrous mystery that is life itself, our own and that of all the people who mean so much to us.

We give you thanks for all that sustains and nourishes our bodies; the food we eat, our homes and clothing, remembering and thanking you too for everyone whose knowledge, skill and labour make it all possible.

We give you thanks for everything that nourishes our minds and brings us pleasure such as the shows we watch, the books we read and the music we listen to. We remember and thank you too for those whose skill, ability and talent make these things possible.

We give you thanks for the medical care we have, remembering all those who selflessly give of themselves for the welfare of others.

We give you thanks for the goodness and beauty of the creation around us in this season of change and harvest.

We give you thanks for this nation of which we are a part, her dreams and aspirations to be a better place for all.

We give you thanks for our church family and the larger church of which we are a part. May we all truly be your Son's disciples, doing our best, secure in your love and forgiveness to be the people living the lives that you have called us to.

Last but certainly not least, we give you thanks for the holy wondrous mystery that is you; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You are the one who has brought it all into being and made everything possible. In these uncertain challenging times, we give you thanks as well for your promised presence with us; that no matter where we go you are present, with us and for us. For all of these things and so much more we give you thanks.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen

