

A 54 year old woman has a heart attack, and is taken to a hospital. While on the operating table, she has a near death experience, and seeing God she asks “Is my time up?” God responds “No, you have another 43 years, 2 months, and 8 days to live”. Feeling greatly relieved, the woman proceeds to make a rapid recovery, and is released from the hospital. Since it appears she still has much more time to live, she decides to go back into the hospital for a face-lift, Botox treatments, liposuction, breast implants, and a tummy tuck – as well as getting her hair colored and restyled, and her teeth whitened. As she is leaving the hospital after getting all these treatments done, she is run over by an ambulance and killed. Arriving in front of God, she demands an explanation: “I thought you said I had 43+ years left to live; what happened?” God’s response: “I didn’t recognize you”.

Identity recognition is one of several themes that come out of our readings for this final Sunday of the Christian year. Our Scripture reading for the Epistle reminds us of the coming of one who would initiate a second Exodus of God’s people, of “days to come” when God would “raise unto David a righteous branch, and a king shall reign and prosper . . . Judah shall be saved . . . he shall be called, ‘THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS’” (Jeremiah 23:5ff.). These words echo similar ones written by other Old Testament prophets about one who would come in history to save God’s people, the Messiah. In fact, over three hundred prophecies are given in the thirty-nine books of the Old Covenant regarding the coming of the Messiah. But do you think that when that blessed event occurred, there was widespread recognition of who would uniquely fulfill those profound promises?

Not really. To many, Jesus’ earthly life was not very important. He wrote no books, composed no songs, drew no pictures, carved no statues, amassed no fortune, commanded no army, ruled no nation. He was a worker of miracles, but He never sought public recognition for His healing. He was called “King of the Jews”, but most Jews actively denied His kingship. His shameful death scarcely produced a ripple on the pool of history in his day. And yet . . . He who never wrote a line has been made the hero of uncountable numbers of books including the greatest book ever written. He who never established an institution until just before his death is the foundation of the Church that bears His name. He who refused the kingdoms of this world has become Lord of everything. Yes, Jesus has become a mighty current in the vast ocean of the centuries since He died. Jesus Christ, Immanuel, came to redeem the world from its sin; only He could offer the atonement that was necessary. And this supreme reality has captivated the world since His day.

But few knew that when He was born. How He accomplished all this is the second theme of the readings for today, as specifically alluded to in the Gospel reading from St. John. Initially, only a handful of people in Palestine knew of His unique mission. Jesus taught Peter, James, John and the few other Apostles about His mission, and they in turn were tasked with telling others. Those who were told in turn told others, who in turn would tell still others. And the story spread

to the farthest reaches of the globe. Ultimately, all of mankind heard about the life and accomplishments of Jesus. And the second Exodus back to the true land of the people of God was and is underway.

And this time, we have properly identified who we are dealing with, and what we are to do. Christ is counting on you and me to tell of His Advent, the coming of which we begin to celebrate next week. His identity is known, and demands the telling. There is no other plan for spreading the word, other than our testimony and our efforts – in short, our lives. This is the continuing commitment incumbent upon each of us as a response to the identity and mission of Christ on this earth. We are to take His identity and mission, and move them forward.

You heard a few minutes ago the Collect for this Sunday before Advent. Commonly known as “Stir Up Sunday”, we pray as indicated in Hebrews 10: 24-25, that we may be stirred up to further increase our good works; “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching”. We also pray that as a result of our efforts, God may be stirred up on our behalf to reward us according to the expression of our faith. As we close the Christian Year, we hope that there has been an increase in our good works, works that will be tested and evaluated at the coming of the second Advent. Where there is room for improvement, and there is always room for improvement, we look to the upcoming new Christian Year as an opportunity to renew both our effort and our results. Where such increase of works acceptable to God has occurred, we look forward to the commendation of our Lord, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant; enter into the Kingdom of God prepared for you from the beginning”.

This reveals yet another theme that is appropriate to this time of year, both in Christian and in secular terms. That theme is one of gratitude, praise and thankfulness for all that we have received at the hand of God. George Herbert, the early 17th century priest and Christian poet whose seminal work The Country Parson still serves as an excellent reference text for new Priests, put it this way:

“Thou hast given so much to me
Give one thing more - a grateful heart:
Not thankful when it pleaseth me,
As if thy blessings had spare days,
But such a heart whose pulse may be
Thy praise. “

Someone has said that if Christians praised God more, the world would doubt him less. Is it not possible that our spiritual life is less than it should be because we are more prone to ask God for help than we are to praise him for it? Forward looking prayer, as an expression of dependence on God for his mercy, is certainly needed and scripturally warranted, but is it not also something of a self-serving and self-centered effort in that it is requesting something from God for us? The backward-looking act of gratitude and thanksgiving is free from this; it requests nothing from God, but something from us. As such, it meets the charge that “we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind”. We cannot give God anything material, for everything is already His, and all that we have comes from Him. But we can give Him praise, thanks, and honor.

This is indeed a season of thanksgiving where we give thanks to God for all that he has done for us as we have made our way through this Christian year. Although it gets harder year by year in this politically correct environment to say this, it is a time originally ordained by the Pilgrims as a response to God for their very survival, and enshrined by President Abraham Lincoln as a national holiday and memorial to God, to express our thanks for his many blessings on this land and its people. May we all, as we enter this time of joy and gratitude, never forget that everything we have been given has come from God, and that God is due our praise and thanksgiving for all the unearned gifts and love which he has lavished on us. May we offer Him true and sincere gratitude and thankfulness for all that He has done for us, and on the basis of those freely given gifts, commit ourselves again to the job of taking His identity and His mission forward in a world that is so badly in need of both. *Amen.*