

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Can one truly be thankful in the year 2020? With all of the suffering that has happened, and the threat of continued challenges in the future, should Thanksgiving (or what's left of it, as we diminish our celebrations this year) be canceled? Would it be foolish or insensitive to celebrate while so many suffer, or while we, ourselves, suffer? The answer, mysterious as it is, is not only that we can give thanks, but that we must! It may seem like a paradox, but praise and thanks to God in the midst of trial leads to a new wave of hope. Is this madness? Let us look at Scripture and see what we may learn.

In Psalm 34 David adjures us, "I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth [...] O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together" (vv. 1 & 3). Can this type of praise and thanksgiving continue, even through difficult times? Does "all times" include even those moments? Yes! Near the end of the psalm, David shows how this persevering thanksgiving leads to hope: "when the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all" (vv. 17-19). While we often speak of hope in the Lord's promises leading to faith, as His promises ultimately become fulfilled, we may also speak of faith, praise, and thanksgiving leading to hope, as our acknowledgment of the goodness of the Lord inclines our souls to trust and hope in Him more deeply. Considering His mercies of the past and present, we have greater confidence in His mercies in the future. Did not Mary follow this perfectly, as David asks all to "magnify the Lord," and Mary is the one whose soul "magnifies the Lord" (Lk. 1:46)?

In the view of the world, this will seem strange. Actually, the psalm admits that. While we don't say it at Mass, many of the psalms have a short introductory text, usually describing the tune that would have been used with the psalm. However, in this psalm we get more. It says, "A psalm of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away." To praise and thank God before our hopes are realized - while we are still in distress - may indeed seem like madness to the world, but it is a character of a saintly life. And our celebration of Thanksgiving this year can be done in such a way as to live out this holy vision presented in Scripture.

This wisdom is not proclaimed in just a single psalm. Let us consider some other places in Scripture. The Book of Ecclesiastes can often seem to advocate a kind of epicurean mentality which teaches, "all is passing so enjoy life while it lasts," but Qoheleth reveals that for God's people it is not the vanity of life, but God's providence as the creator, which permits us to rejoice even when we are faced with moments that seem utterly meaningless. The most well-known passage states, "for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die [...] a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (3:1 & 4). And while for humans, with our limited insight, it means that we "cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end," God does know (v. 11). And so, we may entrust ourselves to divine providence, give thanks, at the very least, for His presence, and find new hope to continue forward.

We see this same wisdom proclaimed in the wake of the most tragic of circumstances of the Old Testament: the Exile of the Hebrew people from Israel. It is hard to overstate the impact of this event on the religious and theological attitudes of our ancestors in the faith. Everything seemed to be lost: the kingdom was destroyed, the people were scattered, their houses were ransacked, their possessions taken, and many had been killed. Many were brought to Babylon and told to start a new life, but with what? So much had been lost. This forms the context for the Book of Lamentations, where the grief of God's people is poured forth with bitter honesty, but profound faith. In many ways we have lost the skill of truly prayerful lament, but we may always turn to this book to see how the Spirit prays for us in

these difficult times, even when we know not what to say. In the midst of this book, there is a moment where the spirit of lament seems to dissolve, and a light shines through. It says, "but this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in Him'" (vv. 21 - 24). Do you see how the same wisdom found in Psalm 34 and Ecclesiastes is proclaimed here? The writer doesn't say that he hopes and therefore will praise the Lord. Rather, he praises and thanks the Lord, and says that those realities, for which He gives thanks, lead him to hope.

All of these texts lead us to an important conclusion: the heart with no thanks has no hope.

We look at one final point in Scripture: the Last Supper. On the night before He died, knowing that He would be betrayed, that He would suffer, and be crucified as a criminal, our blessed Lord gave thanks. He celebrated the first Eucharist (Thanksgiving) and even gave thanks for the disciples, both present and future (read John chapter 17). And His Church, from that moment forward, through all the waves that toss her about here on earth - even through this pandemic - has steadfastly done this in memory of Him, giving thanks and celebrating the Eucharist over and over again, leading each subsequent generation to find reason for hope in the midst of the trials of their age.

When I talk of celebrating Thanksgiving, I do first and foremost mean the Holy Mass, and then the way in which it is echoed in your own celebrations at home, in the "domestic church." And so we ask: should we give thanks? We must! It is exactly what we are to do. For if we want the strength that comes from hope, we must bless the Lord.

When we look at the lives of the saints, especially those who were persecuted for the sake of the faith, and most particularly the martyrs, we see this secret to living in a fickle world: they never stopped praising God, and so they never failed in hope. In fact, they were able to thrive and produce the best of spiritual fruits in the midst of some of the worst conditions.

And that is my prayer for all of you this Thanksgiving. That you may thrive and produce a rich harvest for the Lord, conquering the darkness of the events of 2020 with the light of the eternal Christ. A light that shines in the soul of the righteous who are filled with hope. This is still a year of grace, and some have brought forth extraordinary fruits from their response to the different crises that we have faced. We have tried to share some of these stories in our own bulletin, and will continue to do so. Those who persevere in holy thanksgiving throughout the vicissitudes of life, producing thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold, truly fulfill St. Paul's exhortation, "do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain" (Philippians 2:14-16).

Some may get fixated on the evils we have suffered; some may moan about restrictions we have undergone; some will prefer to look into the void, as opposed to the light of God (it's easier there - unpleasant as it is, the void doesn't call for a saintly conversion of heart and mind, but is content with a spiritual slothfulness). But we, we will give thanks, blessing the Lord and praising Him for His goodness, mercy, and faithfulness. We will be filled with hope. We will shine with His light, and bring that to those who have and are truly suffering, those who long for the good news of Christ. We will produce rich fruits of the Spirit. We will choose the way of Christ, strive to fulfill the august call of our baptism, live a resurrected way of life even now, and run the race towards heaven.

May this Thanksgiving lead you and your families to a new and lasting hope, and may the blessings of our provident and almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, strengthen you for saintly heroism in the midst of any challenge, so that you may walk as victors with Christ unto eternal life!

In Christ,
fr. Jason