

“Can it Long Endure?”

Thanksgiving as an American celebration goes back to colonial days, but it was not always about overeating and watching television. Virginians claim that the first thanksgiving was a worship service held in 1619 at what became Berkeley Plantation. Residents of Massachusetts claim that the harvest feast held in 1621 was the first. I expect that other European explorers held services of prayer and thanksgiving even before these two events.

In 1789 George Washington, at the behest of Congress, proclaimed a day of thanksgiving. In 1863 Abraham Lincoln declared a day of “Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens”, calling on the American people to also, “with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience... fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation...”¹ It was not until 1942 that by an act of Congress the last Thursday in November became the permanent day of the celebration nationwide.

In the 1950s this national celebration took on a decidedly patriotic character. Stories about the Thanksgiving Day service at my previous parish include singing national songs while kneeling and the waving of an American flag in front of the altar. What was initially a time of prayer that focused on giving thanks to God for safe passage to the New World or feasting after a bountiful harvest became a celebration of American Exceptionalism.

While the aspect of family gathering has come to the fore in recent years, God seems to have gotten lost in translation. Exhibit one would be that few churches mark this day with a worship service, and those that do are not full.

As we look at the current state of the nation it seems to me we should focus on what Mr. Lincoln wrote. Like people of his day we need to pray “with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience... fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation...”

Compared to any time in our history other the Civil War, America is sharply divided. We as a nation need to get down on our knees and ask forgiveness from Almighty God for our abuse of one another. We need to repent for not treating our neighbors as ourselves. We need to meditate not on the whether we get another helping of turkey, but whether we as a people deserve our abundance given our “perverseness and disobedience.” We need to beg God to interpose “the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation.”

If we do not, then we may have the sad answer to a question Lincoln asked on the battlefield at Gettysburg. At that time he said we were in a mighty struggle to determine, “whether [this] nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” Let us give thanks that we have endured for 158 years since he spoke those words. Let us ask God for forbearance, mercy, and direction that the American Experiment will continue to endure. Despite our many flaws, may this country continue to be the shining city on a hill that has inspired so many people to work for equality, justice and freedom all across this globe.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_(United_States)) accessed November 24, 2021