

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Harvest Thanksgiving, Oct 16, 2016
Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

We have already celebrated Thanksgiving. The turkey has been eaten and the leftover soup and sandwiches made. Gratefulness has been expressed for the many blessings in our lives: our families and friends, our health and wellness, our safety and security and this wonderful country we call home. Today we continue our celebration and thanksgiving with a more specific focus on the harvest and God's provision for the needs of our lives.

Festivals celebrating the harvest are a common feature of cultures and peoples around the world and throughout time. Planting and harvesting food is a necessary part of all human life and there is a basic human understanding that while our role in the process is critical, there are also critical factors beyond our control, like the need for both rain and sun in turn. At their core, harvest festivals acknowledge and celebrate that for life to flourish, there is a necessary partnership between human beings and the forces of nature, understood by most cultures to be in God's realm. There is something elemental about such recognition that goes far beyond simple gratitude for God's provision of food. Thanksgiving for the harvest encourages us to be grateful for the fullness of life God gives each day, and for our role as full partners for the flourishing of that life.

Today we hear part of how the ancient Israelites celebrated harvest. In a commentary I looked at, the section we heard today was given the editorial title of "Liturgy and Thankfulness," serving to highlight the importance of the connection between worship and gratitude. This is the last chapter of the Deuteronomic law code that began all the way back at chapter 12 and forms the core of the book of Deuteronomy. These 15 chapters are considered the core of God's teaching, given to Moses atop Mount Sinai, though it was written much later.

In very broad strokes, the basic teaching of the 10 Commandments is expanded upon in these 15 chapters, and today we hear the beginning of the last part in chapter 26. Law after law after law, and finally it comes to this: "When you have come into the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name." In other words, upon the fulfillment of God's promise of land of their own - land flowing with milk and honey - the Israelites' first act is to give back to God the best of what is received through hard work, faithfulness and God's grace. The command mixes thanksgiving with liturgy with the ritual act of handing over a basket of the best fruits of the harvest to the priest to set before the altar. It is a gesture that acknowledges the produce as, belonging to God, first and foremost, because the land itself is God's.

It is an important gesture, but it is only the first part of the ritual. The next part of the passage describes the second step of what God requires: "... you shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived

there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” It is one of many, many recitations of the core of Israel’s faith in the scriptures, and here its recitation is the second step in the liturgical thanksgiving. After offering a basket of first fruits, the people are to recall the story of faith as a kind of creed. In these few verses, the Israelites declare their faith by remembering God’s acts of grace throughout their history, and that declaration of faith is a constitute part of their liturgy of thanksgiving.

We do something very similar, not just today, but Sunday by Sunday in every celebration of Holy Communion. After hearing God’s word and responding to its teaching in reflection and prayer, we bring our offering of bread and wine - along with ourselves, our souls and bodies - as living sacrifice. Then we recite the story of our faith in the Eucharistic Prayer, remembering God’s acts of grace in creating us and forgiving our misdeeds through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Confessing of our faith like this is our way of giving thanks and blessing the gifts that have been offered, just as the ancient Israelites are commanded to do today. In our worship today we do it in a bit of a “larger” fashion as we recognize more concretely the bounty of food with which we are gifted... through our ability to buy it and in recognition of those who actually plant and harvest. This offering of produce and other food products is meant to represent the fruits of our labour working together with God.

More than that, responding to God’s commandment today means bringing the best of our fruit... the best of our work, our time, our passion... It means bringing the best of who we are and what we have. And so the question is: What has God given you this year, this week, today... through grace and your own work? What are the first fruits of your labour mingled with God’s work in your life? What is the best of your life, that through this festival of thanksgiving, God calls you to bring and lay down at the altar?

Perhaps you feel like the best of your life is still yet to come or then again, perhaps you feel like your best in the rearview mirror. Either way, or anywhere in between, the point of this celebration, the point of thanksgiving is to live in this present moment and to bring your best, whatever is happens to be today. The response of “I have no ‘best’, nothing, to offer today,” is a denial of God’s work in our lives - a denial of God - just as surely as it is when we think we’ve accomplished or gained solely through our own efforts. There is no objective scale or measurement of what constitutes our “best,” except what each person knows deeply in their own soul. For someone with depression or some other kind of illness, for instance, offering their best to God might mean just getting up and dressed. That might not be the same person’s best the next day, or the next week, or the next year when their “best” could mean something wholly different. Looking back to yesterday’s “best,” or anticipating tomorrow’s “best,” as the measure of today denies God in the present. The point of thanksgiving is to be fully present to the life God has given you today... and we know, along with God, that today’s life is not the same as it was yesterday and it will be different again tomorrow. God doesn’t command us to give what we

don't have... Notice in our passage today that God doesn't ask for a specific "fruit" to be brought... God doesn't ask for rye if this year's crop is wheat, or apples if it is orange trees on the land. God doesn't judge us for what we don't have or who we are not. Rather, God commands us to bring the best of what we have and who we are. And so all of us, each and every human being, regardless of age or health or ability or gender or race... has a "best" to offer, until the moment we die.

In just a moment, I'm going to hand out a piece of paper on which I encourage you to complete the sentence: "The "best" of me that I offer to God in thanksgiving today is..." We'll have a few moments of silence and then a choir anthem for you to reflect on what God has given you, at the intersection of your own efforts and God's grace, that you offer back to God in thanksgiving today. You can then offer your response in the offering plate, along with your regular offering!

Finally, it is important to note that Chapter 26 continues beyond the 11 verses we hear today to complete the final part of the liturgy of thanksgiving. In verse 12, the passage continues: "When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce... giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, then you shall say before the Lord your God: 'I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me...'" Along with offering our best back to God at the altar, and reciting the story of faith, the liturgy of thanksgiving is not complete until we also care for the poor, the hungry and the vulnerable around us. The fullness of God's commandments includes our service in the world. The liturgy of thanksgiving then continues beyond this sacred ritual, and into our day-to-day lives of caring for the world God loves. This last step is spoken in our dismissal each week: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord." and is the part we've been considering through the lens of the Marks of Mission.

May we see God great gift of life today and may we offer the best of it back to God, today and everyday, in thanksgiving and service.