

Dear Friends and Visitors

On November 4 the monks were happy to welcome Fr Mark back home from his long absence in Europe attending the General Chapter of the Order. For his part, Fr Mark testified that he was happy to be home again in Ava, where our simple monastic life hums on smoothly.

Our new church and office arrangements are pleasing to everyone. We eliminated excess monastic choir stalls from our church and brought the remaining ones closer together, toward the center. This aids our singing, and also underscores the intimate nature of our community in praise of the Trinity. As for the office, we have introduced a balance between chanting psalms and reciting them, and between choral and individual psalmody. We have also introduced traditional Cistercian (“Gregorian”) melodies and Latin texts for the hymn at Vespers and Lauds.

November is the month of Saints (November 1, All Saints, November 13, All Saints of the Benedictine Rule), Souls (November 2) and of course Thanksgiving. Every year on All Souls Day we have the practice, as all our monasteries do, of going to the cemetery as a community, blessing the graves and praying for our departed brothers. Standing there in the crisp and dewy morning and looking down, we are aware that one day each of us, too, will be lowered, covered only in our monastic cowl, into the rocky soil of Ava. Stability, one of the monk’s vows, assures him of this, as does his own personal integrity and perseverance in a life austere, hidden, and unglamorous, except for the glory of God that somehow surrounds all our days.

As for Thanksgiving Day, as we do every year we welcomed into our monastic home all our guests and many neighbors and friends, whoever wishes to come, for a wonderful traditional Thanksgiving dinner in our refectory. This year we had twenty guests and plenty of delicious home cooked food. In addition, Fr Richard Fox was with us from the Wednesday before Thanksgiving till the Saturday following. This, as always, was a delight for us.

At Mass on Thanksgiving Day Fr Mark delivered the following homily:

In a recent article Richard John Neuhaus said, “God is not indifferent to the American experiment...America is part of the story that is the story of the world.”

The story of the world is not separate from what we know as salvation history – the story of God’s mighty deeds. “We who are called to think about God and His ways through time,” says Neuhaus, “dare not be indifferent to the American experiment.”

As Jeremiah said, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”

Thanksgiving Day is the American Holy Day. It is where America meets her god as America, and the god she meets is the god she has fashioned to fit the Holy Day: A god that blesses America, sets her apart with a sacred destiny, chooses her. Thanksgiving Day is the day American thinks about this god and about her role in this god's world story. America, on this day, is like the Israelites in the 1st reading from Sirach. There, the focus is on what god does for us in our days, the present time, which is necessarily a closed and a passing time.

But then there is the perspective of 1st Corinthians, our second reading. Paul is not talking to Israelites but to Greeks, that is, not to Americans, but to Africans and Asians and Arabs. Six times in these seven verses, Paul mentions "Christ;" four times Christ is "Lord" – not the American president is Lord, or the European Parliament, but Jesus Christ, the one who came to and in fact did give his life for all, that all might be one; and in contrast to the emphasis on "our present day, our history" in Sirach, Paul sees things in the perspective of "the Day of Christ" – a day whose sunlight reaches even farther than sea to shining sea, a day that sets on no one.

Similarly, in the Gospel, they were not just Americans healed and thankful, but foreigners, too. Rather, it is implied that the nine Americans went off happy with their blessings as due them and taken for granted. It was the foreigner and the doubly outcast who alone connected with the real God.

All ten lepers were cleansed. To the one returning giving thanks Jesus reveals, "it is your faith that has saved you." This salvation is different from the cleansing from leprosy. All were cleansed, an incident in the past; this one has been saved, a continuous state enduring into the future. American can learn from this foreigner. The enduring blessings are not in the body, not mere materialism and athletic vigor. It is the difference between being ritually cleansed, and being divinely saved.

We can learn, too, that thanksgiving is not a response to gifts, but the other face of faith that links us to the Giver. Thanksgiving from faith is ecstatic love that might just leave the gift behind.

The Samaritan leper teaches us something else about thanksgiving. It is seeing and turning back. This is what he. So close are the actions that we can change their order, and this would be a good way to end each day: turn back, and see. At the close of the day, turn back to all that happened, all you met; see it, affirm it, bless it; then fall at the feet of the Giver, giving thanks for all that is; you will find yourself all the more whole and humble because of it.

On this American solemnity, may America turn back and see her story, not as a series of her own days alone, but in the huge story that is the Day of the Lord. May she turn back to see the true God and not just the god of in god we trust. And may she fall humbly on her knees – imagine that – know that in the bigger story it is she who is the foreigner and outcast, undeserving, but blessed all the same.

We were blessed with visits from several of our Associates, come for days of retreat and silence. In fact, all of our guests bless us. It is noteworthy the number of youth who are coming to the guest house for weekends of recollection with their pastors and mentors.

The end of November saw also the end of a liturgical year, and the beginning of a new one. In his homily for the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, Fr Mark pointed out that in the Gospel for the day, Jesus gives three very specific exercises for Advent. First, “Look,” meaning open your eyes, and maybe also the blinds on the windows of your house or room. During Advent, really look and see what is there. Second, “Stay alert.” The Greek word means literally, sleep out in the open, like a shepherd, or a homeless person. Sleep out in the open, and you are alert, even if you doze off. In Advent, then, do some things differently from your normal routine; put yourself at some risk; let go of some creature comforts and personal security blankets. The third exercise is, “Pray.” You won’t find this in some translations of the text; in fact, it is not in the one in our lectionary for Mass. But it does have sound textual support in the Greek manuscripts, and with reason. Prayer, obviously, builds on “Look” and “Stay alert.” Prayer puts us into actual contact with what we really desire, which is God. Prayer is us, as desire, simply desiring.

We wish all our friends and visitors a blessed and holy Advent. May Advent prepare you for a new insight into what we celebrate at Christmas, God becoming Man so that Man might become God, as so many of the ancients loved to say.

Fr Mark, Abbot