

"They that sow in tears shall reap in joy."

Psalm cxxvi,5

Leviticus xxvi,1-13

Revelation xi,1-end

Psalm 30

New Book of Worship, Psalm 30, p.50

The one hundred twenty-sixth Psalm, from which this text is taken, is a Psalm of thanksgiving, though it speaks of tears and weeping. It looks through the tears; it sees through the weeping. It is true to the Gospel, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." It is true to life. The deepest emotions and joys are not expressed by laughter. The philosophy which portrays a happy life as one of mirth, ease, and pleasure is a hollow philosophy, and its followers lead shallow lives. Nothing of value is obtained without effort and sacrifice. The body does not grow strong without labor; the mind does not gain knowledge and power without effort. We have to give up ease and self-indulgence and apply ourselves to our tasks if we are to gain in strength and wisdom. The commonplace is bought at the commonplace price. Worth-while things cost. Their cost is self-denial. "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy."

Our text speaks in terms of the natural harvest, and it is true to nature. Nature does not always smile on the husbandman. Flood and drought, destroying insects, blight, extreme heat and unseasonable frosts make the reward of the farmer uncertain and affect the prosperity of the whole land.

There is always this uncertainty. To us it may seem strange and exaggerated to hear the expression "sow in tears," but call to mind the old days when there was no quick transportation, when nations and cities were mutually hostile, always seeking opportunity for conquest. Then a local failure in crops meant suffering and starvation, and this is still the case today in some parts of the world.

But in particular our text is speaking of Israel, which had its foes on every side. At the time of harvest they would come in force as in the days of Gideon and gather the harvest ready for the sickle, or else destroy it. If we lived under such conditions, we should know what it meant to sow in tears and to reap in joy. And we should understand why, in the Levitical law, it was commanded that when all had been safely gathered in, they should celebrate in the tabernacle the feast of the harvest, a thanksgiving indeed. The law was given in Leviticus in these words: "And ye shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that ye have brought an offering unto your God: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings."

Conditions were somewhat similar in the early days of New England, when the colonists were trying to gain a foothold on this continent. Their success

depended upon the first few harvests, and indeed for many years the fruits of the earth constituted the country's wealth. Historically the first modern Thanksgiving Day was appointed to celebrate the harvest which meant so much to the settlers. They had left their fatherland because of oppression, both civil and spiritual, and set out to find a new land where they would be free.

It was a bold undertaking. Many things might defeat them. So that first harvest was a memorable one. It meant that they would not have to return, that their foothold in the new world was secure. Naturally, we would say, they turned to the Lord to give thanks for the providence which had prospered them. They had won homes in a new and free land.

Little did they dream of the significance of their achievement. Little did they dream of the vastness of the country which they had opened up. The extent of the land, its great rivers and lakes, its marvelously fertile fields, its rich deposits of minerals, and its great forests were not even surmised by them; but they knew that the future was bright. They had won by sacrifice and hard labor, and joy and gratitude filled their hearts. They knew what it meant to "sow in tears and reap in joy."

The meaning of that first harvest deepened with the advance of years, as its importance became better understood, and Thanksgiving Day has become a permanent national celebration.

The new freedom - civil, intellectual, and spiritual - which the colonists came to establish has been realized in a measure unimagined by the original band of settlers. In three short centuries our country has risen to be the most prosperous and the most powerful in the world, and the symbol of opportunity and freedom.

Truly we have much to be thankful for, and it is fitting that we celebrate this day in our churches, and give thanks to the Lord for His kind providence over us. And in our prayers of thanksgiving there should be no vain boasting of our accomplishments, no feeling of superiority over others, no self-satisfaction and self-congratulation. For we know that every good thing comes from the Lord, that the victory is not yet won, that dangers - perhaps more sinister than ever before - threaten our freedom. We must still sow in tears if we are to reap in joy. Yet we may this day deeply rejoice that the precious seed of democracy sown in hardships, doubts, and tears has grown and produced such an abundant harvest.

But our text refers particularly to another harvest, the spiritual harvest when this life is done, and the angel reapers come to gather in the fruit.

Here there are spiritual enemies who would take the harvest from us, who would keep us in bondage and destroy that liberty and freedom which is the fruit

of redemption.

The spiritual thanksgiving is the thanksgiving of those who have become victors in life's inner battles, of those who enter into the life of peace, when selfish thoughts no longer hold them in bondage.

All are not ready to think of this grandest thanksgiving. To the young, with life all before them, it is a distant, dreamy, unreal thought. They cannot rejoice as those whose work is nearly finished, who are about to enter into the eternal life. Yet thanksgiving has its message for every age. How shall we give thanks to the Lord? The little child gives thanks by its innocence, by its quick and affirmative recognition of the Lord, and its ready yielding to the voice of authority. The youth utters a song of thanksgiving in cherishing good and noble ideals. Those in middle age, who are laboring in the work of the world, give thanks by doing their work faithfully, by seeking to serve others, by loving justice and mercy and laboring to establish the Lord's kingdom on earth.

And we may go farther. There is a still deeper song of thanksgiving that we may learn.

We read in the book of Revelation of a song sung by the angels that no one could learn save those who were redeemed from the earth. "These are they," we read, "These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth... for they are without fault before the throne of God." They are not the self-satisfied; they are not the fanatical. They are not those who have exchanged one selfishness for another - happiness here for happiness in the future life.

Who are these? They are those who have believed in the Lord through trial and temptation, who have sensed their own weakness, and have come into a child-like recognition of the Lord's living presence and power.

May we see even in our sorrows and afflictions and earthly losses the Lord's loving hand leading us away from false ideals and unworthy ambitions, renewing our strength from day to day, and enabling us to see the things pertaining to eternal life. This is the song which the man who lives only for this earth and its pleasures can never learn.

So in the days that are left to us here let us learn to give thanks to the Lord always by being faithful to the commandments of Him whose ways are the ways of pleasantness, and whose paths are the paths of peace.

Amen