

# A Thankful Celebration

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Early this morning I saw our neighbor take his kayak and go fishing. He told me last night that if he caught enough he would give us one!

That would be cause for great celebration!

Celebrations in the church are many and varied, from a birthday chocolate to the ordination of an elder – from a child’s baptism to a couple’s wedding. Almost any significant life event is cause for celebration and thanksgiving. We even regard funerals . . . though a sad time of parting, . . . as a celebration of a loved one’s life, well lived.

And I guess in one way or another, that’s been the case for as long as there have been families. Some of these celebrations are not just for individuals but are formal parts of a faith community’s regular cycle of worship. There’s Easter day, Christmas day, and Pentecost. Some traditions celebrate Saints’ days as well.

So it’s quite fitting, that even though **few** if any of us, now make our living off the land, we meet **today** to give thanks for the bountiful opportunities of the land in which we live.

It’s a tradition that goes way back in the history of **one** family – the children, the tribe, the iwi if you will, . . . of **Abraham**.

For that’s what the Jewish nation, at heart, really was - **a family** as numberless as the stars of the desert sky. **A family** through which God intended to bless all the nations of the world. And today we often think of the church as the family of God.

Now the Hebrew cycle of worship at the temple in Jerusalem reminded the Jewish nation of its **heritage** and **purpose** every year . . . at the feast of **First Fruits** which they knew as ‘**Shavuot**’, also called the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost – because it was celebrated 50 days after Passover.

Our **harvest thanksgiving** is a little different in that we give thanks for the **full** harvest “harvest home” in other words, when **all** the sheaves, and presumably **all the shekels**, are already in.

I well remember the hot days of summer working in the wheat fields of my grandfather’s farm, . . . taking a break with the other hands in the shade of the big threshing machine . . . refreshing ourselves with a hot cup of tea from the big billy, and my grandmother’s fresh-baked scones and jam, brought over from the homestead. What a relief at the end of harvest, when all the sacks were stacked neatly in the barn.

Good reason for thanks

But with the Hebrews it was different –  
the instructions in Deuteronomy are clear –

‘When you are settled in the land God is giving you, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, and you shall put it in a basket, and go to God’s house acknowledge to the priest that you are in fact in the land God promised, and when he places the offering before the altar, you shall say:

“A wandering Aramean was my father, he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation. When the Egyptians treated us harshly we cried to the Lord. He heard our voice and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. and brought us into this place – a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground you, O Lord, have given me.”

The instructions make clear that the offering was to be shared with the priests, . . . the family, . . . and the needy in the community.

The Mishnah gives a vivid account of the first fruit offering ceremony in the period of the Second Temple:

“In the early morning hours, the people gathered in the open squares of the district towns and started their journey to Jerusalem, singing "Arise ye and let us go up to Zion, unto the Lord our God." The people walked in procession headed by an ox whose horns were wreathed with gold and silver, and his

head with olive branches. The pilgrims were accompanied by musicians playing the flute. Rich people took the first fruits in baskets of silver and gold, while the poor carried them in wicker baskets made of peeled willow branches (which they gave to the priests together with the first fruits). The baskets contained the choicest fruits and had pigeons perched on top; these were sacrificed at the Temple. At the outskirts of Jerusalem, the procession was met by the Temple prefects and treasurers, and the pilgrims were escorted amid the cheers of the populace to the Temple Mount. There the choir of the Levites welcomed them with the chanting of Psalm 30. Originally, everyone who could recite the confession did so by himself. However, in order not to shame those who did not know the text it was ordained that all people repeat the confession as it was read to them by the priest.”

So the first of the crop belongs to God . . . and in fact, in Hebrew there is a very close **link** with the concept of the **First Born**, technically called ‘**primogeniture**’, a widespread cultural value considered of great importance in the middle east, and to a lesser extent elsewhere.

It was a **crucial factor** with regard to inheritance . . . but not always strictly observed in Abraham’s family.

(eg Isaac instead of Ishmael and Jacob instead of Esau)

On the other hand, **Hannah** dedicated her first born, Samuel, to serve the Lord **in** the temple, even though it was the accepted practise to redeem the firstborn son by paying **to** the temple . . . a token fee.

And of course John the Baptist is **another** firstborn who spent his **life** dedicated to serving God, as in fact was Jesus, himself.

So in every aspect of Hebrew family life, . . . whether nuclear, tribal, **or national**, the first born and first fruits were gratefully dedicated to God in deep thankfulness for deliverance and blessing.

Although it's not altogether clear from the context, when Matthew's gospel records Jesus teaching on the mountainside, it seems that Jesus has the annual thanksgiving pilgrimage of Shavuot in mind when he says:

<sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'<sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,<sup>[e]</sup> you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult<sup>[f]</sup> a brother or sister,<sup>[g]</sup> you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell<sup>[h]</sup> of fire. <sup>23</sup> So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister<sup>[i]</sup> has something against you,<sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,<sup>[j]</sup> and then come and offer your gift.

For Jesus, **right relationships** were far more important than ritual observance. In fact, if **relationships** were out of kilter, the **faith** community was out of kilter, the thanksgiving was **hollow**, and the ritual . . . **meaningless**.

And it seems that the last chapter of John's gospel, . . . our reading for today, . . . was added later, to make clear that Peter's relationship with his Lord had been restored. But John intended to convey much more.

It's a very familiar story – one in which we can so easily see **ourselves**. Imagine the scene -

There were seven of them, all fishermen from Galilee. Along with Simon (the rock) were James and John, Thomas the twin, and Nathanael, along with another two. Perhaps they were waiting for Jesus to come, as he had promised . . . to meet them in Galilee.

Perhaps they thought that there was nothing **further**, after all the excitement. . . . but to return to the **familiar** world they had known.

Anyway, Simon says “I’m going fishing,” and the others join him, . . . in what turns out to be a **fruitless** exercise. They all know the drill; the patterns of long years reassert themselves . . . but to no avail.

Each time they pull in the net there is **nothing**.

The daylight is coming . . . and they are about to **pack** it all in . . . when a **stranger** calls from the **shore** – about as much light as when we gathered down on our beach, for the sunrise service.

Enough for the stranger to **see** . . . even at a hundred yards, . . . that there was **nothing** in the nets.

Yet at this **stranger’s** suggestion, they **wearily** cast the net over the **unfamiliar** side. . . . Might as well try **anything** once.

**Immediately** . . . they know they have a catch – a very big catch, and in a **flash** of understanding, it is **John** who recognise Jesus, but it **Simon** who responds.

And they find Jesus with a **meal** prepared. Although he invites them to bring some of **their** catch, it **he** who **satisfies** their hunger, just as he had on that **hillside** . . . with the little boy’s loaves, and fishes.

Is it not always, the risen Lord who meets our need, restores our well-being, and directs our endeavours, when we listen for his voice, and trust his leading.

In **that** meal, that **thankful celebration**, they **recognise** that the old life has **nothing** for them.

They will be going **back** to Jerusalem.

But **first**, Jesus must set thing right with the big fisherman

“Simon, son of John do you love me more than these?”

“Yes Lord you know that I am your friend.”

Simon, who promised to lay down his life for Jesus only a few days before, . . . knows he has fallen short. But Jesus says “Feed my lambs”

“Simon son of John do you love me?”

“Yes Lord you know that I am your friend”

Again Simon knows he can't claim the same level of devotion he once professed . . . but Jesus says "Tend my sheep"

But then Jesus uses Simon's **own** words

"Simon, son of John, **are** you my friend?"

That hurt . . . like the lifting of a scab, or the cleansing of a wound.

"Lord you know everything. You know that I love you"

"Feed my sheep"

The relationship is restored. . . . Jesus then sketches, what the path of discipleship will really mean for Peter.

Sometimes the life of faith may seem like dull routine, times of unproductive effort, times when there seems no future,

At times like that, . . . we when we've fished all night and caught nothing . . . we need to be attentive to the voice that suggests a different way, . . . even if we don't at first recognise the voice.

You see, it's **only** as we **step out** in faith, that we will recognise the one to whom the voice belongs

Only as we **walk** the path of discipleship

Only as we **seek** to live out the **life** to which he calls us

Only as we **work** to maintain **loving relationships** in our congregation

Only then will the world **know** that we are his disciples.

And only then, will this ritual meal we are about to share, . . . this festival of thanksgiving commonly called the Eucharist, only **then** will it reveal its full depth and meaning.