
Tables of Thanksgiving

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

Across the country this week, many of us gather at tables. Those tables are of all sorts and conditions: ordinary tables in the kitchen, rickety tables that we never got round to fixing this past year, grand tables in the dining room, low tables for the children, tables at restaurants and diners, outdoor picnic tables, laps serving as tables in the overflow rooms, lonely tables before the television set.

What matters, of course, is not the quality of the tables around which we gather. What matters is who we will be with, the quality of our community. Even if some of us are alone, we might take time for a telephone call or conversation. Some of us look forward keenly to seeing old friends, maybe favorite cousins, and maybe extended family members.

But we also realize that the conversations around those tables, after we pause to offer our pleasant thanksgivings, can turn awkward and even sour. Maybe we fear re-visiting those old family arguments, about all sorts of things. Maybe we are embarrassed about having too little this year, or even embarrassed about having too much. Moreover, we admit that our world's polarization and suspicions seem to have seeped into our families and closest communities. We might even fear having to face that relative whom we know recently voted differently from the way we voted. One of us seems elated, and one of us seems devastated. Maybe we dread having to defend ourselves and our opinions again.

In this environment of secular polarization, and of much suspicion of anything Christian, Nick Spencer has written a helpful little book titled, *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity Has Shaped Our Values*. Nick Spencer works from a Christian "think tank" in England called "Theos," and even Muslims are recommending his book. Spencer writes handily about the evolution of such huge subjects as proper law, democracy, humanism, secularization, and even the welfare state. Towards the end of his book, writing about inequality, he says this:

The poor, Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 26, are 'always with you'. Specifically, they will always be with you 'but you will not always have me'. Yet the same words are used – deliberately? – in the final line of Matthew's Gospel, as the resurrected Christ, as if responding to his earlier earthly claims, this time tells his disciples 'surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age' (NIV). His promise is one of presence, being with us, whatever.

'Always with you': the problem of inequality is fundamentally one of not being with people. Vast and/or inherited and/or unmerited differences of wealth divorces us from one another, in extreme circumstances completely and permanently.... It was the unprecedented and threatening bringing together of radically different groups of people – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, young and old – within the earliest churches that sowed seeds that eventually and imperfectly cracked through the ineradicable inequalities of the ancient world, inequalities that went beyond the merely economic and make today's look positively gentle.

Inequality becomes harder to justify, harder to sustain, if you find yourself breaking the same bread and drinking the same wine with others you would otherwise never meet – the reason why box pews and pew rents and the practice of separate communion vessels for rich and poor is not simply a matter of cultural distance but a wholesale desecration of the gospel. At the final count, it is only here, not in the cataclysmic circumstances of war, nor in the chirpily optimistic

*calls for democracy or debate or leadership, but in the deep, pre-political understanding that we are called to be with one another, that we will find a political answer to the problem of inequality. (Nick Spencer, **The Evolution of The West**, page 166).*

Spencer's words give us a good way to understand Thanksgiving this year. Thanksgiving, and especially Christian Thanksgiving, is about striving to be with each other, about coming together with each other. Tables are not meant to separate us, but to bring us together. Thus, the Christian Church, week after week, offers us the ultimate table of thanksgiving, "breaking the same bread and drinking the same wine with others you would otherwise not meet." We reverence an altar around which God's people of all opinions and persuasions gather. We gather because God has loved us, no matter who we are. We gather because we want to love, in the way that God has loved us in Jesus Christ. We give thanks, glorious thanks, for the wideness of God's mercy and love. Happy Thanksgiving!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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