



WE WILL FEAST IN THE HOUSE OF ZION:

A Culture of Thanksgiving Feasts at Redeemer

by Jared Wensyel

Did you know that every Sunday is a holiday? From the earliest days of the church, Sunday has been sacred as the day of the resurrection. While we come together to celebrate Easter once a year, every Sunday is a kind of mini-Easter where we feast in the Eucharist: a word that derives from the Greek *eucharistia*, meaning “thanksgiving.” In this sacrament, we practice gratitude for what Christ has done, experience Christ in the present, and anticipate the day when we will feast with the Lord for eternity.

How would it change our perspective if we treated every Sunday as a celebration and not just as a day off from work? What kind of culture would we have if we saw church on Sunday not as something to do, but instead as a joyous feast of the Lord with our family, the Church? As with the holiday Thanksgiving, we may work together to make the feast happen, but at the end of the day, it is not cooking the food, prepping the table, playing football, or washing dishes after the meal which define the day. Instead, those acts of labor become part of the holy joy of the oneness we experience coming to a single table together.

On Sunday when we celebrate the Eucharist, we say the Mystery of the Faith together: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” There in our feast of thanksgiving exists all aspects of what we are doing: celebrating what Christ has done, is doing in our midst, and will do when he returns. Normally, the priest invites the church to the feast table with the words “The gifts of God for the people of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.” However, during certain seasons of the year, like Advent and Lent, we use an alternative invitation: “Behold the Lamb of God; behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” Every communion service is a thanksgiving feast of the family of God. And when we come together to do this, we are anticipating something greater:

“We will feast in the house of Zion
 We will sing with our hearts restored
 He has done great things, we will say together
 We will feast and weep no more”¹

From the earliest days of the church, Sundays were not the only feast days. The church began to develop a calendar that extended the Sunday feast to other days of the year in which they would commemorate special moments in the life of Christ’s church. These included special moments from the Bible where they would celebrate the work of Christ in the life of biblical figures as well as special moments from the life of Christ himself which the church thought needed to be highlighted. As the history of the church developed, special figures from church history through whom Christ had done great works were added to this feasting calendar. And so, the church formed a calendar meant to cultivate a culture of thanksgiving as it celebrates what Christ has done in the lives of the great cloud of witnesses that came before us, is doing in our lives now, and will do when we are one day reunited with all the saints before the throne of God.

As this calendar developed, a culture of saints began to permeate the church which went beyond the original desire to commemorate the great cloud of witnesses and became a full system of prayer and intercession to the saints. In many ways, people felt closer to their preferred saints than to Christ as their Great High Priest.

As the Church of England went through the Reformation, they confronted the medieval church’s culture of praying to the saints, and instead of getting rid of feasting entirely, decided to preserve a calendar in the Book of Common Prayer of what were referred to as “red-letter feast days” (because they were printed in red text). They then printed “black-letter days” with optional commemorations of other saints and important figures from church history. The idea was that parishes, especially cathedrals, would commemorate the red-letter days whether in the context of communion services or daily offices, and then could choose if they wanted to celebrate optional black-letter days with those figures from church history who were most inspiring to the local body. This tradition continues in the 2019 Book of Common Prayer, in which one can find a calendar with red-letter feast days as well as two columns of optional commemorations, either those specific to Anglican tradition or those who are “ecumenical” (meaning relevant to all Christians).

Red-letter feasts commemorate New Testament figures or moments from Christ’s life. All days which commemorate figures from outside of the New Testament are considered optional. While most Anglican parishes these days don’t celebrate all red-letter feast days, services on those days, or celebrations of the daily office in personal contexts, follow lectionary readings and collect prayers specific to that day in the church year.

As Redeemer moves towards becoming a pro-cathedral for the Diocese of Christ our Hope, we will start celebrating many red-letter feast days: Most likely as an evening communion service. This is a great opportunity to extend our culture of thanksgiving to those who have the desire to participate—in our parish and in the community at large. As our community experiences an opportunity to develop a greater culture of Thanksgiving in celebrating Feast Days, may this habit form us and fill us with joy as we look forward to celebrating the Heavenly Feast together for eternity.

At the Lamb’s high feast we sing
 praise to our victorious King,
 who has washed us in the tide
 flowing from his pierced side;
 praise we him whose love divine
 gives his sacred blood for wine,
 gives his body for the feast,
 Christ the victim, Christ the priest.²

¹ “We Will Feast in the House of Zion,” Sandra McCracken
² “At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing,” translated by R. Campbell
 from the Latin *Ad regias Agni dapes* from the 4th Century