

10 July 2011 St Michaels Studio City  
A Proper 10  
Not on the Propers

The Hunger of God  
The Rev. Canon Mark Shier

“... give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5.18) I would like to take this passage from the New Testament book of *First Thessalonians* for our theme this morning, though it is not one of the lessons we read for today. “... give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

The reason is that, with your permission, I'd like to talk about myself this morning, about how I became an Episcopalian. Two weeks ago at the 9.30 adult forum I talked about my spiritual journey and that has prompted more remembering and reflecting. Let me share some of my life-story with you this morning.

Where to start is the problem. Maybe the day I died? That is, the day I was baptized. Remember Saint Paul's radical understanding of baptism as a real death and beginning of resurrected life, the death of the life we might have lived without God in His Christ and the resurrected life in Christ that will continue through our physical death into the joy of eternity. There is my spiritual awakening, my accepting Christ as my savior, and my baptism into the Roman Catholic Church. How did that young Roman Catholic baptismal candidate come to be this mature Episcopal priest? It's all about a hunger for God. For the sake of relative brevity, let me start with college.

I had wonderful college years. The summer before I started, I changed my matriculation from the University of Washington to Seattle University, a private Roman Catholic Jesuit college on Capital Hill. There in four years I received an excellent liberal arts education with a fine grounding in Catholic theology, theology that has anchored me for living. Since about 90 to 95% of Catholic and Episcopal theology is the same, that training was to stand me in good stead as an Episcopalian. I took my religion seriously but there were signs already of the Episcopalian spirituality that I would one day treasure. For example, those were the days when Catholics under pain of serious sin had to abstain from eating meat on Fridays. Military families, however, were exempt from that law and I was still considered a member of my father's Air Force family. So while my friends suffered through insipid fish on Friday, I was perfectly comfortable with going out for a hamburger. They tasted twice as good on Fridays. I was the envy of my entire dormitory.

I graduated in 1966 and had been accepted for graduate school at Georgetown University. But it was 1966 and war clouds darkened the sky over the Republic of Vietnam. I was drafted into the Army and sent to that beautiful southeast Asian paradise, one of the defining experiences of my life, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. I hasten to say that I was not in a combat line unit but in a relatively safe and comfortable headquarters unit. But that was a war

with no defined lines, and even clerk typists had to live with the possibility of unexpected fighting and death from sniper fire. All those possibilities became reality in the Tet Offensive of 1968. Death came close a couple of times, but I was spared. My religion was a great comfort throughout that time. When you may be talking to your Maker face to face before the day is out, it focuses your mind and spirit wonderfully. The spirituality that had gestated in the comfortable challenges of college was honed and hardened by real suffering and the threats of wartime maiming and death. I became a man in Vietnam, a Catholic Christian man.

As with so many soldiers of my generation, returning home was not as easy as we had anticipated. You begin the week being shot at in Vietnam and end the week discharged into the streets of hometown U.S.A., wondering what to do with yourself. Remember, this was a U.S.A. that blamed the soldier for the idiocy and crimes of the government. It took me a year to return to some kind of emotional and spiritual normalcy. I threw myself into graduate work at Berkeley, suppressed the memories of the terror of Vietnam, and disappeared into the bottle, a struggle with alcohol that it would take me fifteen years to confront and surmount.

And I left the Church. The contrast was too great, the contrast between holding onto your God with every fiber of your being in the face of death and the experience of the average parish where the pastor was preaching nonstop about the necessity of giving more money to support the parish and school. It just seemed idiotic. It wasn't, of course, it was just normal. But I was in no normal state of mind and soul. And so, after several attempts at fitting in, I walked away. But I am a worshiper at heart and I need God in the community of the church. I came to Los Angeles for graduate work at UCLA and tried the local Catholic parish without success.

I had an Episcopal friend who invited me to church, St Augustine's Parish in Santa Monica. I went without much enthusiasm but became intrigued. There was a different spirit about this church, a different way to go about being Christian, a different, healthier spirituality. I began to explore this church. It had all the things I valued in my Catholic faith: a sense of the concreteness of God and the spiritual life, time-tested ways of living the life of the spirit, sacraments (these physical channels of spiritual realities and energies), a sense of mutual responsibility for the life of the church. But it had something that was missing in my Roman experience: a welcoming of questioning and the spiritual quest rather than a demand that one just accept because the church says so. I soon discovered a greater intellectual honesty, too. The history of the Christian community and of Christian thought is far more subtle than what I learned in the Rome-oriented world of Roman Catholicism, where the Pope is always right and for your own spiritual welfare you had better accept and obey. These Episcopalians, who I learned were the Church of England in America, were honest about the beginning of a separate existence for their church in the lust and marital problems of a syphilitic king of England. Yet here, too, was a Christian tradition that was strong before the Pope's representative set foot in England in the late sixth century, a tradition which wove together ancient Celtic Christianity and continental Roman Catholicism, strongly influenced by Reformation thought and discipline, a church that welcomed you even if you didn't fit in perfectly. It wasn't a perfect church, but it was one into which I fitted better than in Rome.

It took awhile. I began to attend every week but could not allow myself to go to communion, usually the only one in that whole church that didn't. Then one day without even thinking about it, I followed these folk to their altar rail and received our Lord in Holy Communion, a communion I had denied myself for months. I had found a church to belong to, one that has kept my allegiance for over forty years. Eventually I moved to Fullerton, was received by Bishop Rusack into the Episcopal Church in the parish church of Saint Andrew the Apostle, where eventually I was to be the rector for thirty-two years.

That is how I became an Episcopalian, a bit of a messy process. My conversion used the strong conceptual basis of my Roman Catholic experience, some mental and spiritual anguish and thrashing about, a refusal to deny the thirst for God despite my own failures and despite the shortcomings of those who should have served Him better, and the invitation of a friend to explore his church. Never doubt the power of your own individual witness. Invite a friend to experience this wonderful treasure that we have in the Episcopal Church. You may be the means of transforming a life.

I now know what Saint Paul means in his first letter to the Thessalonians when he says, "... give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." <sup>(5.18)</sup> I give thanks for my Roman Catholic experience. I give thanks for my anguish in Vietnam. I give thanks for my lostness and searching. I give thanks for a friend who shared his treasure with me. I give thanks for my hunger for God. But, more, I give thanks for God's hunger for me. That is the real reason I am an Episcopalian today.