

The Last Sunday after Pentecost  
Bruton Parish Church  
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr  
Sunday, November 20, 2011

Autumn is my favourite season of the year. Williamsburg no longer resembles a Petrie Dish growing mould and bacteria, or an autoclave. The leaves turn gorgeous colours and my soul doth glorify the Lord. It is also the season that brings out my Inner Scrooge. That's Ebenezer Scrooge from Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." That Ebenezer Scrooge. The very one who gave us that deathless line, "Bah! Humbug!" as he condemned the sentimental excesses of Victorian Christmas. Not the feeding of Tiny Tim or the pitiful Bob Cratchit, of course. Just excess.

"But surely," I hear you say, "we are not having Kerr's annual Christmas diatribe already? Why it isn't even Advent yet."

Well, that's true: Advent Sunday is next week and there are still many shopping days left until Christmas and you'll find clergy a-plenty to denounce the commercialization of the Feast of the Holy Nativity when the need arises. And yet, it's not too early to speak of Christmas: have you been in Target or Walmart recently? Their halls are already decked with boughs of holly and other Manifestations of Festive Cheer.

But this morning's readings resonate with my Inner Scrooge: it is autumn and the dour Calvinist Puritan in me has awakened and here's why.

Hallowe'en. Americans spent \$6.9 BILLION dollars on Hallowe'en this year: 6.9 BILLION DOLLARS! "I was hungry and you fed me orange and black candy. Thirsty and you gave me over-sweetened gassy drinks to drink. Naked and you dressed up as witches and ghosties and goblins and ghouls. Or, last year, at the Hallowe'en party for the large company that specializes in mortgage foreclosures, the jolly employees dressed up as homeless people. There are photographs to prove it. Wasn't that fun! It's Hallowe'en! Lighten up! Anything goes, right? Right? 6.9 billion dollars worth of levity! Mock the afflicted!

The Episcopal Church in Chincoteague meets in a Funeral Home. Why not? Cramming for Finals! And in this Season, all over its lawns are inflatable coffins and inflatable zombies (buy one, get one free.) This very expensive display went up before All Saints' and All Souls' Days and the Eucharist for All the Faithful Departed. I wonder what they'd do if they had an actual funeral? Deflate the gravestones with green skeletal hands beckoning, let the air out of the black cats (Inflatable: no actual animal was harmed in making this display.) Our gentle service of Commemoration for our Faithful Departed compares favorably, I think, with the blood and horror excesses of Hallowe'en, or perhaps worse, sheer contempt for the least of these my hungry, thirsty, ragged, homeless family.

My Inner Scrooge finds the excesses of Hallowe'en contemptible: "Bah. Humbug." doesn't go far enough. What would Jesus say? "Oh they are just having a bit of jolly excessive fun. Let the goats frolic! Let them ignore my sheep!" Or what would Ezekiel say? You might give some thought to God's judgment on the fat versus the hungry sheep, a story that clearly influenced Jesus and St Matthew. It's hard to find anything in the Bible which suggests that either contempt for the poor or neglect of their needs shouldn't get in our self-indulgent little ways of having fun. It is

impossible to find any hint that our actions and our attitudes have no consequences. And were one to consider for one moment that to God all human life is sacred, created and redeemed by God?

Hallowe'en is over. Now we have Thanksgiving! Joy! Joy! Joy! and the Inner Scrooge is awake again and growling. Christmas is coming! Soon enough we will have the rotating Winnie the Pooh, Tigger and Piglet inflatable illuminated Christmas Globe at \$59.95 plus taxes, plus shipping. What joy it will give the family on its way to the food bank, which is empty, by the way.

But first, collectors of holiday schlock, Thanksgiving! You can get an eight-foot-high inflatable turkey dressed as a Pilgrim. Actually, you can see a smaller, but equally tasteless, one outside the Shell Station out on the Jamestown Road just past 199. You could buy your very own Pilgrim turkey windsock and turkey-shaped hats are out there waiting for you. And, *and*, how can you wait? A set of four rubber Thanksgiving Duckies! Two pilgrims, a turkey and an Indian! No Thanksgiving bathtub should be without them! Not saturated yet? How about something, I find this hard to say without weeping, even greater: an "Autumn Jiggler Turkey Wobbler Bobble" – dressed as – you guessed it, a PILGRIM!

I object not at all to families gathering for Thanksgiving, partly because it's not a canonical Feast of the Church and so everyone can take part, religious sheep and atheist goats. And there's a lot to be said for giving Thanks. And for families for those fortunate enough to have one. For those fortunate enough to have a safe and not dangerously dysfunctional one. The Native Americans, I was told, celebrated Thanksgiving on seven occasions throughout the year: they seem to have had lots to be thankful for until we arrived.

And the origins of Thanksgiving are worth thinking about. It happened in a time of hardship, not peace: dozens of colonists had already died from cold, disease and malnutrition. The real Thanksgiving had its origins not in plenty but in deprivation. The Wampanoag Indians went home to fetch food for the colonists. The Wampanoag Indians are like the sheep in the Gospel. They are the ones to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the beginning of the world.

Even the goats in the parable didn't hold an office party and dress up in sheep's clothing to mock the Lord's hungry, homeless little ones. In Jesus' parable, in the Gospel of St Matthew, the goats are condemned to be cast into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, merely for ignoring the needy. I wonder what the judgment would be on a culture of contempt like that foreclosure company?

The Inner Puritan turns from tales of excess and folly and finds that Thanksgiving, as a National Holiday, was created in 1863 by your great President Abraham Lincoln. 1863: the middle of a Civil War which already had claimed the lives of half-a-million people, nearly 15% of the population. Whatever the deprivations of the cold and hungry pilgrim colonists, they were as nothing compared to what this country was enduring then. Wars are like earthquakes: you can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake. In 1863, no-one could predict whether this country would ever recover from its loss and grief.

How did we get to inflatable turkeys dressed as pilgrims from President Lincoln's declaration of the holiday?

" I do ... invite my fellow citizens... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving...And I recommend ... they do also, with humble penitence for our national peverseness and disobedience, commend to God's tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers..."

My severe Inner Scrooge would not be awake and troubled if we kept the real discipline of Thanksgiving. If we did not, goat-like, ignore the suffering of others, and certainly did not mock it, but fully acknowledged the distress of the needy and, like the Wampanoag Indians, rushed straight home and emptied our larders to feed the hungry, thirsty, cold and naked this Thanksgiving. The work of the Gospel, the work for us, is to be the means by which God's tender care becomes effective. Not only my Inner Scrooge doubts that this is best done by inflating turkeys dressed as pilgrims. How great our Thanksgiving would be if we acted so as to hear our Lord say to us, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."