

THE PILGRIMS AND THANKSGIVING

by Allan A. MacRae, Ph.D.

When I was a schoolboy in northern Michigan, at the time of Thanksgiving Day we had many pictures in school about the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving Day. It made quite an impression on me as it would on any young person. Imagine how shocked I was years later to see displayed on the cover of one of our most popular magazines the headlines, "Let's Have No More Nonsense About The Pilgrims!" The article inside said it was utter nonsense to make so much fuss about the Pilgrims. It claimed that the writer's ancestors had been fishers off the coast of Main at the time the Pilgrims came, and letters from friends in England had informed them that there was a group of poor people trying to make a settlement south of them and they might see if they could give them a little help toward surviving. They said the Pilgrims were not the first to come to American but that in 1607, fourteen years earlier, the Virginia colony at Jamestown was established. So why all this fuss about the Pilgrims?

Let me tell you why the Pilgrims are important?

I. THE COMING OF THE PILGRIMS WAS AN ADVENTURE STORY OF GREAT COURAGE AND RESOLUTION ON THE PART OF THOSE WHO FOUNDED OUR NATION, REMINDING US OF WHAT THEY FACED IN ORDER TO GIVE US A LAND OF FREEDOM AND PROGRESS.

The Pilgrims were those English people called Separatists because they did not want to be tied into the established services of the Church of England. At this time the bishops had complete control over the Church of England, and Queen Elizabeth had

complete control over the bishops.

The Queen desired her nation be a Protestant. Just how sincere her belief was we do not know. She wished the Bible to be preached and be available, but she did not wish ministers to ever have Bible study discussions. They must have no meetings except those established under the order and arrangement of the bishops. As little groups all over England began to study the Bible, they found themselves enjoying the presentation of Biblical teachings by well-trained ministers not connected with the Church of England, and they became dissatisfied with being ordered to attend only those very formal religious services.

Two brothers, Francis and George Johnson, both university graduates, went about preaching the Word of God to the people until they were seized along with two others. The other two were executed for their faith, and the two Johnsons were put in prison. After they had been in prison five years, the English decided they would release these brothers from prison if they would be willing to help establish a colony in America where it was hard to get people to live in primitive conditions. The brothers volunteered to go.

They embarked in a ship which was blown by a big storm to the coast of Canada and wrecked. Taken prisoners by the French, they managed to escape and got back to Amsterdam, Holland. Though free from prison the prospects of the Separatists settling in America seemed dim!

In Scrobbie, a town in Northern England, there was a group that gathered to hear the preaching of several godly preachers even

though the meetings were forbidden under Elizabeth. When James became King in 1604 they hoped for better opportunity but instead one of the first things James did when he came to England from Scotland was to declare that he would harass the Pilgrims out of the land. He opposed individual initiative in Bible study.

One good thing he did was to pick a group of fine scholars to make a new translation of the English Bible, that stood for 300 years as a monument to its excellent translation.

These people in Scrobbie were greatly hampered in their Christian life. They heard about how the Dutch allowed religious freedom in Amsterdam for the preaching of Francis and George Johnson. So they decided to leave England for Holland. But James' soldiers were on the lookout for them. Their ships were seized and they were imprisoned. But eventually they managed to get to Amsterdam where they stayed about a year.

Certain church dissensions in which they did not wish to become involved convinced them to leave Amsterdam for Lyden where they stayed from 1608 to 1620. Though they had full religious liberty the Dutch made it difficult for them to get any kind of self-supporting work except the most menial labor. Growing dissatisfaction over some elements of Dutch practices and their desire to raise their children to be English rather than Dutch made them decide to seek another place where they might live in accordance with what they believed the Bible taught.

The Pilgrims asked the Dutch for support in establishing a colony in Manhattan but the Dutch, though interested in establish-

ing a settlement there, did not want to promote a colony in America composed of English people.

The English already had a colony in Virginia made up largely of people they had let out of prison in 1597. Many of these had been killed by Indians or died of starvation. Also the colony had very strict laws about attending Anglican church services -- if you missed two services you were publicly whipped, and if you missed three you were executed! The Pilgrims thought they might as well return to England as try to live under those conditions.

However, since the English were anxious to establish a colony in America an arrangement was negotiated by the Pilgrims to come under the English government's general oversight but with the right to handle their own religious affairs as they pleased. King James happened to be in an unusually good mood the day they made their request, and he gave permission if they could make a go of it.

Even while these negotiations were in process, a group of 180 had crowded into a small ship in order to go to Virginia to take their chances with its religious regulations, but midway in the Atlantic they ran into a big storm, an epidemic broke out, and the captain and many of the crew died. None of the survivors knew how to manage the boat but after several months it reached Virginia with only about 30 left of the original 180.

News of this had gotten back to Lyden just as the Pilgrims were negotiating and may well have cast a damper on their spirit to go forward. But these Pilgrims were very anxious to depart. They arranged to have a boat, the Speedwell, come to Holland to take

them to England where others joined them. On August 5, 1620 they set out in the Mayflower and Speedwell together to cross the ocean. Twice they had to turn back because the Speedwell sprung a leak and it was not until September 6 they were able to sail again.

For nine weeks the Pilgrims were crowded together crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the Mayflower. They intended to go to Manhattan to build a colony under the King's authority, but big storms changed their course so that they reached land considerably to the north of it. Later they came to believe the Dutch had bribed the captain to not take them to Manhattan but to take them further north because a year later the Dutch established a colony at Albany and then at Manhattan.

Hoping to find a decent place to live the Pilgrims stopped at Cape Cod. A number of them went ashore to hunt and on one of these expeditions they were shot at by Indians making them wonder how much success they would have. Weeks later, of December 21, they landed at Plymouth Rock which they thought would be a good place to settle. Almost immediately an epidemic broke out and half of them died during that winter. Some stayed on the Mayflower and some stayed ashore in a rude hut they put up. Those who stayed well cared for the ill including the amazed sick sailors who had done everything they could to make it disagreeable for the Pilgrims on the way over. In the spring the Mayflower went back to England leaving the little group untrained in agriculture to manage to survive and establish a colony that left a permanent mark on American history. It is a great adventure story of the determina-

tion and devotion to what these men believed in. So different from that of the early colonists of Virginia. It is well worth remembering for that reason.

II. THE LANDING OF THE PILGRIMS IS A MARVELOUS ILLUSTRATION OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE BECAUSE IF IT WERE NOT FOR GOD'S WONDERFUL CARE THE PILGRIMS NEVER WOULD HAVE SUCCEEDED IN ESTABLISHING A LASTING HOME HERE IN THE NEW WORLD, PARTICULARLY IN THAT NORTHERN CLIMATE.

We have noted the possible intention of the ship's captain to take them further north with the result that they did not settle in New York. A year later the Dutch came and colonized Albany. Forty years later the British seized all the Dutch possessions. In God's providence the Pilgrims were led further north where it was far more difficult to live.

Also, in God's providence the Pilgrims did not come five years earlier in 1615, because if they had they probably would not have lived a month after they landed. In 1614 an English captain had stopped at the large Indian village at Plymouth where after trading with the Indians and winning their confidence, he had invited 14 of their finest young men to come on board to see his ship after which he seized them and sold them as slaves in Spain. Following such treachery you can imagine how the people of that village would have received another group of Englishmen a year later!

But in God's providence the Pilgrims came not in 1615 but in 1620. Thousands of Indians had been living at the very place established later as Plymouth. All through that area there were thousands of other Indians who were industrious, able, and war-

like. The little group of 100 Pilgrims landing in their midst would not have lived very long. The Virginia colony lost hundreds of its people through Indian attacks in the course of those years.

But in the providence of God there was a great epidemic so terrible that not a single man of the Pautucket Indians lived through it. Only the 14 that previously had been sold as slaves into Spain escaped it! If the Pilgrims had arrived before the epidemic struck they would hardly have continued to live very long. If they had arrived during the epidemic they would doubtless have died of it. If they had arrived shortly after, they would still have caught the disease and died. But coming as they did five years later, they had no idea it had been a large Indian village. To them it looked like a nice place to settle.

During the first year they only saw one group of Indians who fired arrows at them. So in the providence of God quite apart from any clever planning on their part, they came to a safe place. They had no way to talk to the Indians. They were poor with only a very few well-trained people among them. They had no skill in agricultural production. The first two or three summers they had to live on what seeds they could gather or fish they could catch. They nearly starved. When they had been there a short time an Indian came walking into their camp holding out his hands to show them he was not armed, and he spoke in English. He told them he had come from Maine on a visit. He promised to return the next day with some friends.

The next day Samoset brought one of these 14 men who had been

kidnapped but who had escaped from slavery in Spain. He had made his way to England where he was employed by a man who treated him well. This employer had a ship that was coming to America and the Indian, Tsqawanto, wanted to get back to his own people. So his employer arranged for him to come and he had arrived in Plymouth six months before the Pilgrims came and he found that everyone he had known before there was dead. There was no sign of their death at Plymouth but a few miles in any direction thousands of bones remained of those who had died of the epidemic.

God had prepared Tsquanto to be ready to give the Pilgrims the help they needed without which they never could have succeeded in surviving and establishing their colony. He showed them what plants would grow well and how to catch various kinds of sea food. Best of all he was a friendly interpreter who enabled them to make friendship with the few Indians who remained in the general area. If these Indians had been hostile they could easily have wiped out the Pilgrims.

Through Tsquanto the Pilgrims became acquainted with Massasoit, the head of a number of Indian tribes in the area. After Tsquanto died two of the Pilgrim leaders showed kindness to Massasoit when he was ill. After he recovered he showed his gratitude to the Pilgrims in supplying them with information that resulted in saving their lives from an Indian attack.

III. THE SURVIVAL OF THESE 100 POOR PILGRIMS TREMENDOUSLY AFFECTED THE CHARACTER OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND PRESERVED THE PURITAN MOVEMENT FROM ENGLAND.

In England there were thousands of Puritans who wanted to have churches in which the Word of God would be preached as they understood it should be. These people were skilled in many lines of work. Highly trained people having large possessions were among them. The thought of leaving their homes and crossing the ocean to this cold, unsettled area among hostile Indians never occurred to them as a viable alternative until they heard how this little group of 100 poor people came here and managed to survive and have freedom to worship God as they believed God wanted them to worship Him. The effect of the news of their success was electric.

In the next twelve years 26,000 Puritans left England for the Massachusetts area. Whole towns came with men trained in every type of skill that was important to life at that time. Probably 100 of these were highly trained university people. These settled here in large numbers and set the tone for the United States. They let people throughout Europe feel that here was an area where it was possible to have freedom to worship God in accordance with their understanding of the Bible. For twelve years they came, and then they stopped.

They stopped because the situation in England became such that the Puritans thought they could make England a truly Christian nation under Cromwell's leadership and so they lost interest in emigrating to America. But when Cromwell died those who opposed the Puritans and considered them fanatical came into complete control of the government. Preaching not authorized by the bishop was absolutely forbidden. As a result John Bunyan and Richard Baxter

were among those who were persecuted by the government. For the next 100 years English life sunk to its lowest depths and the Puritan movement eventually died out there. But it had been transplanted to America and this never would have happened if this little group of poor Pilgrims had not shown the way and God in His providence had not enabled them to do it.

IV. THESE PURITANS ESTABLISHED FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN AMERICA AND A HAVEN FOR REFUGEES SEEKING THIS FREEDOM. During the next century and a half religious refugees from all over Europe came and settled in this country whose Christian background has influenced American life in a way that would be hard to duplicate anywhere in the world.

Moreover, the Pilgrims established free enterprise as typical of American life. For the first two years they tried a communistic system of strict control over the land and its produce. All its harvest was brought into a common store and distributed to each according to their need. Then Governor Bradford discovered this system was not working. He said that if ever such a system would work it ought surely to work for such a group of sober, industrious, godly people as we have here. But the strong and able found it hard to have to work for the wives and children of other people and share no more than those who could not do half the work. Brave and aged men felt it somewhat of an indignity to be reduced to an equality and made to work in the ranks with the younger and meaner sort. Husbands rebelled at the idea of their wives having to dress the meat and wash the clothes of other men feeling this to be a

kind of slavery hard to break.

So Bradford stopped this system, and gave ownership of the land equally to the families according to their size. After that the change was unbelievable. These godly, industrious people worked twice as hard as they had before. The whole family was interested in producing all they could, and the colony went forward.

The free enterprise system that the Pilgrims established became characteristic of our country along with the spread of Christianity. No blessing God ever gave our nation was greater than His providential care for this little group of 100 poor people to lead the way. God enabled them to succeed where others had failed, and people with greater ability, greater possessions, and greater training would never have thought of trying.

For three centuries Christianity and the system of free enterprise were characteristics of this country. During the last 50 years those who oppose both of these gained control of our school system. Our young people have been trained to believe there is no God and that seeking their own personal pleasure is the only thing that matters in life. They have been trained to believe that the government should do everything for them. How long the results of those who established our nation will continue is hard to predict. But we can thank God for what He did in enabling the Pilgrims to survive and to succeed. We can pray that He will enable us to spread His Word during whatever years may remain of what was typical of American for three centuries.■