Wednesday, November 22, 1972
A THANKSGIVING MEDITATION

My brothers and sisters in the Christian faith, we are all also Pilgrims. Let us therefore tonight consider how that first Thanksgiving occurred and what led up to it.

On September 16, 1620, a ship called the Mayflower crept out of Plymouth, Devon, in England. The Mayflower was an old wine-carrying vessel that had plowed the Mediterranean a good many years. Although ages and creaky, the sturdy vessel was a sweet ship. Due to her traffic in spirits, her hull was fairly well saturated with alcohol, and this might have helped avert an epidemic on the crossing. The seepage from the wine barrels had soaked into timbers and offered some resistance to bacteria.

The }1ay£1ower was a square-rigger, some 90 feet in 1Qngth and 26 feet in breadth. She carried six elaborate sails and complicated rigging.

The Pilgrims were a youthful company; only four were fifty years and over: William Brewster and his wife, Mary; John Carver and James Chilton. All the rest were in their twenties and thirties and 34 of the passengers were children. The total was 102 persons.

It staggers the imagination to try and visualize how they all endured the long voyage, huddled into such limited space. Passengers were forced to live below the main deck in a low-ceilinged area called “tween decks.” The diet consisted of hardtack, salted meat, dried fish, cheese, dried beans, and peas. Beer was their drink. The ships galley cooked only for the crew. The Pilgrims prepared their own food on small cookers set in hearth boxes that were filled with sand to guard against stray sparks. Families cooked on a staggered schedule. Sometimes they had oatmeal sweetened with molasses or a suet pudding. They slept on pallets on the floor.

The dangers of diseases on the ship matched only the terrors without. Mos.t of the passengers were desperately seasick. Think of being crowded for 66 days to one’s elbows, trying to find a place to sit or lie, with clothing and food supplies piled about, with no refrigeration or sanitary facilities. In addition to these complications, there were children to care for in illness and to amuse when well.

Most of the crew were kind to the pathetic voyagers, but one sailor derided them as “psalm singers.” There were times when the seas were calm and the passengers enjoyed some respite from seasickness, when they sang their Psalms and ballads and when the children could play blindman’s buff or other games.

During the voyage a child was born. This may offer an in- sight into why they survived. With so many young on board there was a future and something to live for. Ill, hungry, miserable, and frightened as they were, this new birth must have sent a tremor of hope through the entire ship.

On November 19, they sighted the highland of Cape Cod. The pale passengers rushed to topside for a glimpse of the new world. Some knelt in prayer, others wept and embraced one another. They rejoiced that their arduous passage was ending. The land of their hopes lay ahead. On further thought, however, they were dismayed to hear from the crew that it was not

Virginia, but some other area to the north. Uncertainty about their whereabouts and their destination checked their first exuberance.

The Pilgrims came to Provincetown harbor, Cape Cod, on NOVEMBER 21, the sixty-sixth day at sea. In their anger, some of the sailors demanded that the captain dump the passengers on shore and turn back to England. The general disorder and the threat of mutiny led the wiser Pilgrim heads to call a council. It was decided that a written document should be prepared in order that every person would know where he stood and that fair treatment would be extended to all, including the hired men, servants and the humblest on board. The document so drawn up and signed was the Mayflower Compact.

The Compact made Plymouth Plantation a self-governing colony. It emphasized the covenant concept through which the people pledged to submit themselves under God to the ordinances and offices and seek the good of their associates. The compact bound its signers to promote the common good and to yield obedience to the laws that their community would frame.

The compact was to play a role in the development of American democracy. It repudiated the aristocratic system which exalted the privileges of the few and established a small community based on a signed mutual agreement.

Brewster and Carver, who had been chosen by the vote of the people to serve as elder and governor, stepped from the ship onto the shore of another continent. The soil beneath their feet was to support the first self-sustaining colony. From the small beginning of this weary band a new nation was to evolve which would summon pilgrims from a hundred countries around the globe.

Those who went ashore fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element.

Soon the pilgrims were chopping down the trees with their crude tools to make timbers and boards for the first common house. On landing they did not find habitation of any sort or see a human being. It was not until March that they met the first local Indian. -

Fortunately, the Mayflower remained in the harbor all winter. Passengers lived aboard, moving away from the dismal hull as soon as shelters on shore were available. But soon the Great Sickness set in, and one half of their company perished. Sometimes there died two or three persons a day.

Captain Jones himself was stricken with the Great Sickness and although he had lost almost half of his crew, he dis-patched a message to the governor and those who were sick on shore that they should send to him for beer for those who had need of it, even though he had to drink water on the homeward voyage.

The bitter winds swept about the Mayflower anchored a mile and a half offshore and around the frail cottages, whipping their icy breath through the cracks in the single walls. When at last, the cold was forced to retreat before the spring sun, only one half of the colony was alive. Four entire families had been wiped out. Only three married couples were left. Only five out of eighteen wives survived. The record shows that parents sacrificed for their children. Youth were the principal survivors and the colony, which was a young company on landing, was now even more youthful.

The epidemic had left them depleted, but the survivors rallied quickly. They gathered the orphans into their houses, welcoming them as their own. Widows and widowers remarried. The closed ranks tightened their belts and faced the tasks at hand.

One day on March 1621, an Abnaki Indian appeared in the village announcing, “I am Samoset.” He had learned some English from British seamen of Newfoundland. He brought with him Squanto, a local Patuxet Indian, whose people had been wiped out a few years before in a deadly epidemic that swept Hew England. Squanto became their interpreter and tutor. He taught them where to hunt and fish, where to gather clams, nuts, and berries, how to catch the alewives and bury them three to a hill around the maize for fertilizer with their heads turned in about the corn and their tails fanning out. He warned them to stand guard with their matchlock muskets to keep the wolves from digging up the fish and the crows from eating the corn.

When he told them about the time for planting corn, he did not say during a certain full moon after the spring solstice. He gave them a time that they would always remember when the leaves on the oak tree were the size of a squirrel’s ears.

Shortly, the Indians and the Pilgrims agreed to the following treaty which was kept for fifty-five years:

1. That neither the Indians should injure or do hurt to any of the Pilgrims.

2. That if any Indians did hurt any of the Pilgrims, they would send the offender that they might punish him.

3. That anything taken would be restored by either side.

4. That they would aid each other if any did unjust war against them.

5. That when they came to visit each other, they would leave their weapons behind.

The Indians furnished the Pilgrims with food, visited in their homes and some came and set up camp outside the Village Palisade.

In mid-April, the Mayflower set sail for England. It is something to ponder that not even one chose to return.

In Autumn, the Pilgrims gathered in their first harvest. Some 20 acres of corn laid out by Squanto brought a re-warding crop, but their six or seven acres of English barley, wheat and peas disappointed them. They cut and shocked the corn, tied up their grain, and stored the pumpkins, dried -peas and beans in the Common House. Now they could look about them with a gathering sense of security. Their village included some seven dwellings, with others still in the building. The good earth had blessed them. Their Indian brothers and sisters had been of invaluable help and aid to them. So, they set apart a time for thanksgiving. Their Indian friends were invited, and ninety of them arrived with their chief. The Indians brought deer they had killed with their bows and arrows, while the Pilgrims furnished geese, ducks and turkey brought down by their matchlocks.

The spread rough tables with a tempting array of these meats, along with lobster, clams, fish, eels, beans, pumpkin, salads of leeks and watercress, corn cakes, Indian pudding sweetened with wild honey, grapes, plums, and red and white wine made from wild grapes.

The festivities, which lasted three days and involved sports and contests, cemented the ties of friendship between the Indians and the white people.

Tonight, as we prepare to celebrate our Thanksgiving to-morrow, we remember our Pilgrim forbearers, and we remember with thankfulness especially our Indian brothers and sisters whose generosity and friendship helped us to sur-vive. We regret that they are not here to celebrate this Thanksgiving with us, as they were present at the first Thanksgiving.

It is our prayer and hope that we shall now help the Indians to survive as they once helped us. Amen.