

A LABOR OF LOVE

Ambassador Matthew W Barzun

Thanksgiving Service, St Paul's Cathedral – 27 November 2014

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!

The last time I saw so many American faces was when Brooke and I were hosting our first Fourth of July Party at Winfield House.

And I have to say, it felt a little strange celebrating Independence Day here in England.

I mean, independence from...you know who. And there were lots of Brits there of course.

But a British friend said: "Don't worry. We celebrate July 4th here too. Only we call it Thanksgiving."

Good one.

Brits are very sporting about getting through that distinctive American holiday.

And they tend to enjoy this one too, when they get to experience it.

An Anglican Bishop I met, who had attended several American Thanksgivings, had a funny observation:

"You Americans have this odd homing instinct that kicks in this time every year," he said.

"You travel great distances to see what you call 'family and friends,' but who in many instances we Brits would probably call strangers..."

"No cousin too distant to justify hopping on a train. And you seem to enjoy all this effort."

It's true, don't you think? We do enjoy it, even though Thanksgiving – like much of life – involves work.

Hard work.

I'm told the average American treks two hundred and fourteen miles to visit family and friends for Thanksgiving.

Some of you here today have probably come considerably farther (including my wonderful in-laws here from Kentucky and California).

And think of the feats of culinary heroism.

Brining, trussing, stuffing, basting, carving. The attention. The anxiety. And that's just one dish.

And that's exactly what makes Thanksgiving so wonderful.

It is a labor of love.

The British writer and theologian, Dorothy Sayers, who I mentioned at last year's service, divided work into two categories.

On the one hand, is that done from -- in her words -- "a grim sense of disagreeable duty".

It's the kind that is equated with sacrifice and gets plenty of praise from preachers in pulpits and politicians at podiums.

On the other hand, she believed, there is the work which we undertake for the joy and pleasure it brings – and which seldom draws admiration.

"I do not mean that there is no nobility in doing unpleasant things from a sense of duty," she argued. "But only that there is more nobility in doing them gladly out of sheer love of the job."

Someone who fully embraced that approach was one of my predecessors, John Gilbert Winant, who came here during the Second World War.

He had been a successful politician despite being shy and halting as a public speaker.

But he just seemed to genuinely care more than other people did – which is why FDR picked him for the job.

When he arrived, he was met by George VI at the train station in Windsor.

It was March 1941. London was ravaged by the Blitz. Daily life was a struggle. Some people had abandoned the city. Others were desperate to leave.

This wonderful cathedral had been bombed about six months earlier, and would be again about six weeks later.

Yet the very first thing that Ambassador Winant said to the British press was this: "There's no place I'd rather be at this time."

And with that, Ambassador Winant began a labor of love to help free Europe from tyranny.

By day he worked with Churchill to convince FDR that America needed to step up its engagement.

By night, he walked the streets of London during air raids to help dig people out of the rubble.

And it worked. He succeeded. He achieved big feats through small acts of labor, small acts of love.

In his memoirs he captured what a labor of love meant to him.

“Doing the day's work day by day, doing a little, adding a little, broadening our bases wanting not only for ourselves but for others also, a fairer chance for all people everywhere.

“Forever moving forward, always remembering that it is the things of the spirit that in the end prevail.

“That caring counts and that where there is no vision the people perish. That hope and faith count and that without charity, there can be nothing good.”

That prescription – now engraved on his tombstone -- remains the touchstone...

...for every ambassador who has succeeded him...

...and for all of us at Embassy London in our daily work.

The special relationship is our labor of love.

And if you are here, it's because you care about this special relationship too.

And while we in the Foreign Service might like to flatter ourselves that it is we who nurture and grow this partnership that is often called the greatest the world has ever known...

...which helps bring relief to starving nations, schools to developing nations, and peace to warring nations...

...it is actually you who do that.

This special relationship of ours is not the outcome of a summit. No one signed a pact or a treaty. It wasn't negotiated as part of some agreement or accord.

To use Churchill's other phrase for it: it is the Unwritten Alliance.

For it is born of and sustained by the millions of living, breathing relationships between Americans and Brits that all of you represent today.

So as my act of giving thanks, I would like -- on behalf of the United States of America -- to say thanks.

To you. All of you. For the work you do gladly, nobly; day by day, doing a little, adding a little.