Thanksgiving Day in Canada, as in many other countries, was originally a harvest festival, a time to rejoice in, and give thanks for the land and for those who work it. For many today, especially those living in our larger cities, Thanksgiving has lost its direct connection with nature. The focus now is more on the family and on its coming together and sharing in a festive meal.

As true as that is, people with even a minimal sense of the creator God and of his abiding presence to the world tend on Thanksgiving Day to think of and to give thanks for the many ways in which he continues to be gracious to us and to pour out on us gifts of nature and of spirit.

Science continues to teach us about the world and the earth – about their strength and power, their beauty and delicacy. There are many ways, by which we can learn about and marvel at God’s creative activity. To begin we need only to stop and look around at what surrounds us - trees and flowers, lakes and mountains, the sky in all its changing colours and moods, to recognize signs of the infinite mind and heart that called them into being.

These things and countless others have been entrusted to us to protect and care for and to use in ways that will serve the wellbeing of the whole of humanity. Unfortunately, we tend to take for granted even the most extraordinary of God’s gifts. When we recognize them as the gifts, which they are, we are moved to give thanks for them and to use them in ways that reflect the intention of their creator.

It is not by chance that the most important ritual for the majority of Christians is called the Eucharist. At its heart is a solemn prayer of praise and thanksgiving in which we recall, celebrate and give thanks to God for his many gifts, including the gift of the person and life of Jesus.

Because the Bible is primarily the story of God and of God’s relation to the world and to humanity, much of what it says about gratitude is about the gratitude we owe to God for the gift of life and of all that exists.

The ten people who approach Jesus in today’s gospel are suffering from various forms of skin disease, all of which the Bible describes as leprosy. That they keep their distance from him underlines how they and people like them were forced to live apart from their communities and their families.

Their appeal to Jesus is for mercy, mercy in regard to their physical condition, mercy also because of the terrible isolation under which they are obliged to live, something, which many of us, especially the elderly as well as many young people, have experienced to varying degrees throughout the pandemic.

Luke’s account of the incident comes to a climax with Jesus’ questions to the man who has returned to thank him for having cured him. “Were not ten made clean?” Jesus asks, “The other nine, where are they?” The fact that the one person who does return is a Samaritan, someone whom the Jewish people at the time regarded as a heretic and a foreigner, underlines the self-centeredness of the nine revealed in their failure to return and give thanks to Jesus for the gift he has given them.

To thank someone ordinarily presupposes that he/she has given us a gift or done something for us. It could be as simple as holding open a door or helping someone pick up spilled groceries. It could also have to do with something far more important, something, for example, that made a real difference at that moment in our life.

The gratitude we feel towards God for the gift of life and of the whole of creation, and to Jesus for the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace, should spill over and become a feature of our relationship with one another. Everything we are and have are, to some degree, the result of what others have done for us, or given to us. To our parents we owe not only life itself, but the fact that for years, in the vast majority of cases, they nourished and nurtured us, taught us how to speak and think and to relate to others. I for one am enormously grateful to all those who at every level contributed to my education. Like many of you, I am grateful in a personal way for our health care system and for the many wonderful and dedicated people who work in it.

The more we recognize how much we have received, the more spontaneously do we express our gratitude. For a person of faith, the greatest gifts come from God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

God’s gifts often come to us through others, through family, friends, and the country and culture in which we were born or in which we live. For these, also, we should be grateful. Expressing gratitude to one another can deepen our awareness of the gracious God who in so many ways continues to bless our lives.