

“The gift of Australia” Deuteronomy 28:1-9

If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the LORD your God: Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways. The LORD will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you undertake; he will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in his ways.

Today we all together confessed our faith saying the first article of the Apostles' Creed together with Luther's explanation from the Small Catechism. Luther in his explanation lists many things, many blessings that our Lord the Creator daily and abundantly provides for us.

But I wonder, how would Luther phrase his explanation if he lived today? I think he simply couldn't imagine all the magnificent gifts that our generous Lord has given to us, and even harder it would be for him to understand – how can we be so ungrateful living in the fairest and the most prosperous civilization ever?!

We have it so good, so, so incredibly good, that we, who today live in Australia or any other Western country, should marvel at our situation as some sort of a miracle. For a miracle it is. Let's see, what do we have?

Sure, our affluence, that is the obvious one. Even if this is true that more money doesn't necessary lead to more happiness and joy. But just think about one example of how incredible our civilization is.

We live in this small town – Tanunda, and any day of the week, we can just walk into our local grocery store and buy good, fresh stuff from ... yes, from literary anywhere in the world. And we don't even pay attention, we don't marvel about it.

But let's go to more important things. Our freedoms. We have so many of them. We can believe what we want. We can access whatever information we want. We can say what we want, share all our ideas. For now. As Christians we can gather freely.

We can worship freely, we can come in the presence of our God without any hinderance, not too many want it, though. We don't need to hide our dearest convictions, and we can live according to them. Again, not too many are interested.

We can choose where we want to live. We can choose what we want to do. Any profession. There are no obstacles. Next, everyone has access to education. Go and study as much as you want, regardless of your age.

Everyone has access to all sorts of medical help. Hospitals, doctors, dentists... We can choose where we want to travel. We can leave our country and we can come back at any time. We have this freedom to move wherever we want.

We can even influence our government. Through elections, but also by having direct access to our MPs. We can even harshly criticize our government, our leaders, and sadly – too many obviously think that this is their main calling in this life.

Imagine how safe we are! In so many ways. Police officers are just one phone call away. There are systems and organization in place that take stand against different sort of injustices and discriminations, in workplaces, in families.

If something does go wrong, in many situations we recover most of what was lost with the help of insurance companies. There is military guarding our borders days and nights. We live in peace and prosperity. We have lived in peace for a long time. It is almost unprecedented in the history of humanity.

And if for whatever reason you are not prosperous enough, or without income, you are still cared for and supported. The state does it. Isn't this whole thing a miracle? So many gifts, so many wonderful blessings! Such a great place to live!

But how often we do thank our generous Creator for all these amazing and very enjoyable gifts? And how often do we complain and walk around bitter and unhappy if something is not immediately happening the way we would want it?

Today is Australia's Day. It is a fitting time to reflect – how should we as Christians respond to this abundant grace and care of our faithful Lord? And all our today's readings are of great help.

“If you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in his ways... [He] will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you... The LORD will establish you as his holy people.”

If you keep His commandments and walk in His ways... Again, we can ask – what are those commandments that the Holy Spirit is referring to speaking through Moses? All of them. All ten of them. Remember this? [2KR]

Our relationships with the Triune God and with one another and with His entire creation. In our today's reading Mark has recorded Jesus saying: “Render to Caesar

the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Render to Caesar or the state what is due to them, and to God, what is due to God.

First, what are the things that are God's? [1stKR] Remember, Jesus used this excellent illustration; He took a coin and asked whose image was on that coin. It was Caesar's. So, Jesus said, if the coin has the image of Caesar, give to him what is due.

But then there was something that remained to be read between lines. If the coin had Caesar's image on it, what about us? In whose image are we made? More, who has written His name of us? That's right. We are made in the Image of and likeness of the Triune God. More, He has written His name of us and ... we are His.

Therefore, first we are to give to our God what is due to Him. What is it? Paul puts it nicely in Romans 12: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

If you are created by God, if you are redeemed by Jesus Christ, then present yourself to be in His service. Take up with joy all the responsibilities He that has prepared for you – be fruitful and multiply, take care of creation and for all people that He has placed in your life, and spread the Good News to all the nations.

Our God gives us His wisdom and all the guidelines necessary for these tasks. He reveals His wonderful design for our marriages and families. He instructs us how to approach our work and business. He also makes it plain how we should treat this planet, this creation that is entrusted to us.

Recently the question of our relationship with creation has been hotly debated. On the one extreme are those who want to almost worship creation. People don't matter that much, as long as we are nice to our "mother nature". On the other extreme are those who are guilty of misusing and abusing God's good creation to satisfy their greed and ambitions, those who do great harm to creation.

Christians are blessed by God's wisdom to know, that on the one hand, the creation is good, very good and as such entrusted to our care – to keep it and to work it. On the other hand, we know that creation is not the Creator, and we don't put our trust in it, and we don't elevate it above the needs of those created in God's image.

Now, the other part of what Jesus said was about the state. [2nd KR] Give to the state what is due to it. This is what our reading from Romans was about. We can see this ugly trend in our society – to be disrespectful and often unwarrantedly critical towards our government and the leaders of our country. This trend reveals the worst in us – when we try to elevate ourselves by cowardly putting others down.

And surely, there often are good reasons for constructive critique. For every government, and every institution will inevitably be made up of sinner, and will operate in this society of imperfect and selfish people.

However, we need to remember that there is one thing that is much worse than the worst of governments. That is – the absence of government. This story was told by a survivor of Nazi concentration camp during WWII.

As he reflected on his experience, he said that the worst of all times was the time, when the Soviet Army was approaching and German army had already fled, leaving for several days everyone in the camp to do whatever they wanted. That was the worst of times, with no order, everything left in the hands of mob...

We need to appreciate the value of peace and order that we enjoy. The true significance of it probably can only be grasped when it is lost, and we wouldn't want to learn it that way. No one would.

Then how are we as Christians to relate to our government? Both Paul and Peter speak on these issues. "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."

"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good... Honour everyone... Fear God." This is what we need to strive for, this should be our way.

So let us hear the wonderful promise of our God once more: "If you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways ... the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you...

... Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground ... Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. ... The Lord will establish you as his holy people."

For as Psalmist says: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." May our Lord help us today and every day that we are able to see and appreciate His generous gifts, our country and our government including.

To rejoice in them and be grateful, to receive and treat them properly, and to strive to keep the commandments of the Lord and to walk in His ways, so that He can, indeed, continue to bless our nation.

Amen.