

## **“Give! Be free! Rejoice!” Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

**“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.’ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God.**

**“And you shall make response before the LORD your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labour. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Harvest Thanksgiving... that is our focus today. Has our Lord been generous with us or not, has He blessed us or not? The obvious answer is – yes, most certainly so! If we just paused for a moment and reflected on the countless gifts that our generous Father has poured over us, as Dr Luther so neatly summarized in his explanation of the 1<sup>st</sup> article of the Apostles’ Creed.

**“I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them; in addition... clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, spouse and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods;**

**He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life, protects me from all danger, and guards me and preserves me from all evil; and all this out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I owe it to Him to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true.”**

Yes, He has made us and given us our bodies and souls and all our abilities and talents. He did it. But also, He so richly provides for us our daily bread. So richly as never before in the history of humanity. At least as far as we can tell.

How would previous generations, who lived just a century ago, how would they marvel if they walked in our supermarkets, or seeing our houses, technologies, our medical system and social safety nets, and so on and so on.

Perhaps, they would believe that finally we have been able to create Paradise here on earth. But now let us reflect on something rather challenging? What do you think – these countless material blessings – what do they bring us?

Do they bring us a life of freedom and joy, or darkness and death? “Hey, pastor, why such a strange question? What do you mean?! Isn’t it obvious that all these wonderful things have made our lives so much easier, much more enjoyable?

Those all are good things, they are our daily bread, the same things that Dr Luther mentioned in his explanation of the 1<sup>st</sup> article. How can good things bring us darkness and death? It doesn’t make sense...” Doesn’t it?

I may have shared this, it happened a few years ago, when we had this unusual and quite disturbing experience. We were out for an evening walk with Jana, slowly touring through Tanunda. You know how nice our towns and cities look at night.

What did we see? Gorgeous homes, neat gardens, new and shiny cars, beautiful lights, making it all look a bit mysterious, a bit like a fairy tale, so, so nice! So many God’s blessings on display, so many...

And suddenly the words of Jesus from Matthew 23 came to mind... about the whitewashed tombs. Clean, nice and orderly from outside, but inside – full of decay and death and all sorts of uncleanness and ugliness. And just like that... the idyllic picture that we saw changed...

How many of those beautiful houses have the light and life and freedom of the Gospel in them? How many? But if they don’t have it, then whatever shiny and glittering they may appear from outside, under the surface there is nothing more than darkness, decay and death. Sounds harsh?

But that’s true about everything in this world. This is why Jesus urges us: **“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... [where they are subject to decay] ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”** (Mt 6:19-21)

What does the future hold for us, if we have everything that the eye craves for in this world, but do not have the Spirit of God in us? The terrifying answer is – only death and decay and condemnation... gnashing of teeth and eternal darkness.

Think about the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment! There is something interesting in its phrasing. We usually say the short form: **“You shall have no other gods.”** But when you read in Exodus it continues – **“... no other gods before me”**.

Before me? What is that about? This is actually a great visual help. Our Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit comes so close to us, that there is nothing in between. No separating walls, no mediators needed.

So that He can provide for us the most important things. Life, eternal life and freedom, our self-understanding, dignity, worth, purpose and meaning, security and hope and joy and peace, and so on. So that we could receive all those most precious immaterial things directly from Him.

He says: “Do not place anything between us!” Especially don’t place there anything that in your eyes may become a substitute to the true God. Do not place His gifts between you and the Holy One! But what do we do?

Are our eyes fixed on the Triune God? Who do we trust the most? Who or what do we desire most? From whom or from what do we expect all good things? Where have we placed our faith? In the Giver of all good gifts, or in those gifts?

Do we joyfully receive every good gift from the very source of everything good, or, perhaps, we have placed so many good things between ourselves and God, that we can barely see Him? How often the good things become deadly snares to us?

How many in our society have built such huge walls from the abundant gifts that our God has provided for them, so huge that they can’t see God anymore, that they have forgotten who is behind all those good things? Completely forgotten...

They have used God’s abundant blessings to divorce themselves from the very source of those blessings. They have chosen darkness and death. And sometimes the only way for them to remember about God the Creator and Redeemer is – to experience those separating walls painfully crushing down on them. For good...That is the tragic reality of the affluent world in which we live.

**Fortunately for us, today’s reading from Deuteronomy reveals God’s cure for this deadly malady**, when we place God’s gifts before the true God until we forget about Him. What was it? Remember what the Lord commanded? Take the first fruits, the best part of your harvest – whatever your harvest may look like – and bring it to the Lord, to the place where He comes to meet you as your thanksgiving.

How do we hear this command in our hearts? “Ha! He demands me to give away what is mine! He asks for what I have earned with my hard work! For what I have studied and toiled and fought for?! Just to give it away?!”

I guess that is how fallen human beings often hear this command. But how does the Word of God allow us to hear it, how do we as Christians hear it? Remember, everything who we are and everything we have are God’s generous gifts to us.

As the apostle asked so pointedly: “**What do you have that you have not received?**” What if we were created as bodiless minds to drift around in the lifeless, dark, cold and totally uninhabitable Universe?

What would our great wisdom and hard work have achieved for us? How much would we have achieved if we were born just a century or two ago? How much if instead of Australia you were born in Somalia or Afghanistan, or any other poverty and war-ravaged countries like those?

There is nothing that we haven't received. Life, time, place, everything! Now, return to the Lord the first fruits, the best share of what He has first given to you! But what is the point? Why should we do that? Does He need anything from us?

No, but He instructs us to live this way. But why? For our good. Because He cares for you, for your well-being, and He wants to teach us also to care for one another. But how would that work, how would giving away the best we have help us?

This is how - **it gives us freedom, peace and joy**. Yes, you heard it right. When the Spirit enlightens us, when we begin to see who we are and who our God is, our eyes and hearts are gradually detached from those things we kept before God.

We are made free, free to trust that God is our Father, that our lives are in His hand and that He cares for you, He knows what you need before you do. This trust then grants us peace, for you know that your future is in the hands of your God, of your generous and merciful Father, that He will be with you and will provide for you.

Thus, His peace surrounds you and fills you with joy, for now you are free to use the gifts He has given to you, also to serve others. We don't need to heap up those gifts anymore; we don't need to build larger barns to store more for us to be safe.

We can experience the joy of giving, of sharing, of denying ourselves and sacrificing ourselves for others. And that is the recipe of true joy and happiness. Not when we gather for ourselves, but when we are able to give, generously and abundantly, experiencing how our gracious God blesses others through us.

Remember! This is who you are created to be. Yes, in the likeness of our God, in the likeness of Jesus Christ. He is a generous God. He doesn't just give us some stuff. He doesn't just give us all the stuff He has made. More... He gives us Himself.

Though He was rich, He became poor for our sake. He gave away everything. He left His divine abundance and glory, He humbled and emptied Himself and came to dwell among us, to share our flesh, our life, our joys and our sufferings.

Why would He do that? So that through His sacrifice for us, His death and resurrection, we could have this chance to have everything that He has. He came to remove everything that separates us from the love of God the Father.

He came to erase the foolishness in our hearts, that keeps building those walls between God and us, putting His gifts as His replacements before Him, that is – our sin. Now our generous God not only gives us our daily bread...

... He also gives us new hearts and He offers us to share in His life, in everything He has. We will never be free, at peace or as joyful as we could be until the Spirit convinces us to **“seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and [then] all these things [that you need for your daily life] will be added to you.”** (Mt 6:33)

I pray that our Father grants this to all of us – to enjoy freedom, peace and joy, to be generous living in the likeness of Jesus. So that our God is truly our God, and His gifts are... yes, just that, His gifts. Then we will be truly blessed, and He will make us a true blessing to others. Amen.