

Blessings from God

*Deuteronomy 8:7–18; Psalm 65:8–13;
1 Peter 1:18–21; Matthew 6:24–34*

The first reading from the Old Testament book Deuteronomy: words spoken by Moses to Israel as they were about to go into the promised land. But whenever I hear those words, I can't help thinking of this land of Australia:

the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper (Deut. 8:7–9).

We would have to be some of the most blessed people in the world, living in this country of Australia. Acknowledging that we are not the first people to be here—that the Barnjarla and Nauo people have been living in and caring for this part of the country for thousands of years. What Moses reminds us in the book Deuteronomy is where all this has come from. Psalm 24 says:

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it (Psa. 24:1).

It's all from God who made it, and it comes to us as gift. We are all from God who made us, and we are God's gift. How do we respond to that? Moses says:

You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you (Deut. 8:10).

Which is what we've come here this morning to do.

Just as the land that God was taking Israel into is very like this land of Australia, so the temptations that we face are very like the temptations that the Israelites succumbed to. Moses warned them:

Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God . . . Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today (Deut. 8:11–14a, 17–18).

All these riches are a blessing from God, but they are also a serious spiritual hazard. Jesus said the hardest thing is for a person with riches to enter the kingdom of God—to come under God’s good saving rule (see Mark 10:23–27). We can very easily end up saying, ‘I did all this—I planned it with my mind, and I carried it out with my hands’. But where did we get our mind from, and how did we come to have hands? Did we go out into the shed or the workshop and somehow put them together? No—our mind and our hands, all we are and everything we do, are all part of the gift, from God! We are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ (Psa. 139:14). So ‘remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth’—so thank God for it all. And why has God gone to the trouble of making all this and putting us where we are? Paul the apostle says it is so that we ‘should seek God, in the hope that [we] might feel after him and find him’—that we might enter into a working relationship with God. And ‘he is not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being”’ (Acts 17:27–28). Moses said God has given us this power to get wealth ‘so that he may confirm his covenant’—a covenant is a binding relationship. God’s covenant is God’s promised working relationship with us, here, and for eternity.

So: “Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am

commanding you today'. What are these commandments? We started this service with them:

you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . you shall love your neighbour as yourself

—and all the moral and practical out-workings of that, as spelled out in the ten commandments and elsewhere in the Scriptures. When we fall into the trap of saying, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth', then we also will start making up our own rules to suit ourselves, rather than coming under our wise Creator's good and salutary rule.

When we refuse to come under God's good rule, there are consequences. Israel found that when they abandoned their covenant relationship with God, difficult things happened in the good land: there were droughts and famines, there were locust plagues, there was rampant inflation, there was even invasion of the land by enemies. All of this was seen also as the work of God—giving us over to what is in our hearts, bringing us to Himself the long way round, if we refuse the easy way, the way of faith and love. Because God is still determined to have us in a working relationship with Himself, even if it costs Him dearly.

How does God bring us back to Himself when we have rejected His covenant and His commandments? One picture God uses in the Bible to depict that relationship with Him is to say that we are like sheep, and that God is our Shepherd, our sheep farmer. One of my early country parishes included Karoonda and the upper mallee—marginal country. Good Shepherd Sunday was coming up, so I thought I'd quiz one of the sheep farmers around Karoonda as to what sheep farming involved. So he told me all about what sheep farmers did with their sheep—the dipping, the drenching, the mulesing, and so on—and in my sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday I took each of those things that sheep farmers do with their sheep and showed how Jesus does similar things with us. It was very clever, and people were impressed. So much so, that I

decided to preach the same sermon again when I later moved to Kapunda, near the Barossa Valley. I said I'd got all this information from a mallee farmer, and one of the sheep farmers from around Kapunda said, 'Yeah, I thought so—that's how they do things out there—we do things differently here'. So that deflated my pride a bit. And no doubt we do things differently again down here on the Lower Eyre Peninsula, so I'm not going to try and show off by preaching another sermon like that here this morning. Except to say, from the second reading this morning, that Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, but he is also called the Lamb of God. He is shepherd, and he is sheep. Jesus is on both sides of the equation, if we want to put it that way. Jesus, coming from God, knows what it is like to be one of us. More than that: when we have done the wrong thing, Jesus in his love for us takes all of that wrong into himself, and suffers it and finishes it there, so we can be free of it. He's 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). We know what happens to lambs. Many of them grow up and are shorn, as we are going to see this morning. And many of them are slaughtered, so we can have a good feed. That's what happened to Jesus, hung up on the cross. As the sacrifice. Where God dealt with human sin finally once and for all. Except that God raised him to life again, as 'a lamb without defect or blemish' (1 Pet. 1:19). We are going to 'feed on him'—on his risen life—as that Lamb of God, later this morning. Peter says that the plan for Jesus to be the 'lamb', the one who would do that for us all, that plan or destiny was in the heart of God in His love for us from 'before the foundation of the world' (1 Pet. 1: 19, 20). Peter says:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish . . . Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God (1 Pet. 1:18-19, 21).

Through Jesus we have been brought back, and taken on, into that right good close working relationship with God.

Now we are there, in that close working relationship with God, how do we relate now towards the material wealth we have as God's blessing

to us in this rich land? We relate to material wealth in the way that Jesus spelled it out for us in the gospel reading from Matthew chapter 6. We determine who our true master is going to be (see Matt. 6:24). Are we going to be slaves to our possessions, or are we going to use them to serve God? The wool to be shorn will be spun and woven into some beautiful clothing. We are going to share food in a nice barbecue after this service. But neither of those things are ends in themselves. Jesus said: 'Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?' (Matt. 6:25). If we make food and clothing the main things we worry about, then we are being very short-sighted. There's more to life than just those things. Those things are given to us to keep us going so we can have a good close working relationship with God. So we lift our eyes to notice what God is doing in His creation—which is why we are out here in this beautiful place this morning. We see how God clothes the flowers and trees and the grass of the field with rich beauty. We see how God provides food for the birds of the air and for all His creatures. The 'lilies of the field . . . neither toil nor spin' (Matt. 6:28), but God clothes them. That does not mean we should not toil and spin—we're going to have some spinning here later this morning. The 'birds of the air . . . neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet [our] heavenly Father feeds them' (Matt. 6:26). That does not mean we should not sow or reap or gather into barns—the town of Port Lincoln is dominated by a huge rank of silos. Our ability to shear wool from sheep and to manufacture beautiful clothing, our ability to plant and harvest crops and build silos to store them in—these are all part of the marvellous gift of God to us. We take encouragement from these wonderful things of God's creation here and now, to know that we can trust God to provide all we need, to be in a close working faith-love relationship with Him, in His world, working with God towards the world to come. God is building for us, and with us, and through us the world that will be—the whole renewed creation where there will be nothing unclean, no sin or death, no more sorrow or pain, only God's righteousness (see 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21–22). So Jesus says, 'Strive first for the kingdom of God'—the Father's good saving kingly rule over all things—'Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness'—God's saving goodness to us and to all people—and

all these things’—food, clothing, and the ability to keep on producing them—‘will be given to you as well’ (Matt. 6:33). Not as a reward or a bonus for putting God first, but to equip us to go on putting God and His marvellous saving agenda first, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, as we love each other, and all others, with the love that has come to us from God—the love that has come to us from God through Christ, by the Holy Spirit—and with all the blessings that come to us with that, in this wonderful land.