

GOD'S GIVING AND OURS

What is your picture of God? There are a number of different pictures of God that we could have in our minds, but I want to give you one to start with this morning. It is of God as a waterfall. Not so much a waterfall, as a mighty cataract. Thundering down from higher than any tall building or church steeple. A Cascading-River-Of-Superabundant-Strength [CROSS]—its flow mighty and measureless, that never ceases. An abundant and never-ending supply of clear fresh water, flowing out into the whole of creation.

Psalm 46 says, 'There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God' (Psalm 46:4). There was never a river flowing through the city of Jerusalem—the Psalm is saying, God is our river. And Psalm 65 says, 'the river of God is full of water' (Psalm 65:9).

Our focus on this Thanksgiving Sunday is on God's abundant giving through the whole of our lives and the whole of creation, and our participation in God's abundant giving.

Let's start with a couple of things that happened in the life of Jesus. The first one happened when Jesus and his disciples were at a wedding. The wedding feast ran out of wine. Jesus quietly told the servants to fill some huge stone water-pots with water, and serve it to the guests. And when they did so, it was beautiful wine! We would call that a miracle. And so it was. But changing water into wine is a miracle that still happens every time it rains on a vineyard.

The rain waters the vines, the vines grow grapes, the grapes are made into wine. So water is turned into wine. Here Jesus just speeded up the process a bit. To show that the Creator of all things—the One who gives the rain to make the vines grow—was at work in Jesus. A comment is made at this point: Jesus in doing this ‘revealed his glory’—it showed what Jesus is really like inside, and what he had come to do—and so what God is really like all the time. God’s glory shining out, for any who have eyes to see it and hearts to believe it. You know how much wine he made: 160–180 gallons (730–820 litres) of wine! God wasn’t selling anyone short at that wedding.

The second incident in the life of Jesus that I want to tell you is when he was followed to a desolate place by five thousand men, plus women and children. And he had compassion on them, and he taught them about God our heavenly Father, and then he fed them all—from only five loaves and two fish! And in the end there were twelve baskets of left-overs. What was happening there? Same kind of ‘miracle’, of multiplying resources, that happens every time the harvester comes in with much more grain than was planted out in the first place. Jesus did the same thing another time, when he fed four thousand people from only seven loaves of bread. On that occasion there were seven baskets full of left-overs. That’s the way God is. That’s what He is doing all the time in this creation of His.

A while after that, Jesus and his disciples got into a boat and crossed the lake, and then the disciples began to panic, because they had forgotten to bring any bread with them. And Jesus said, Hang on—“When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces

did you collect?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven" (Mark 8:19–20) And Jesus said, So, what are you worried about? Haven't you got it yet?

Well, have *we* got it yet?

Jesus never did miracles just for the sake of it. His miracles were never just things in themselves. They were always signs. And a sign isn't the real thing, even though it may have the name of the real thing on it. There may be a sign down the road that has 'Anglican Church Port Lincoln' on it. But that sign is not the Anglican Church Port Lincoln. It points people to it, but they have to come here to find the real thing. A sign is not the real thing, it points people to the real thing. So what is the real thing that Jesus' signs point us to? Remember I said that when Jesus turned the water into wine he revealed his glory? There's another time that same thing is said, and that is when Jesus was about to go to his death on the cross. Just after Judas had gone out into the darkness to do his dark deed—to hand Jesus over to his enemies who were going to kill him—Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified' (John 13:31). In other words, this is when you are going to see my true glory, and the glory of my Father—what we are really like, and what we're on about all the time, is going to come shining out. And then Jesus went out, and was arrested, and falsely tried, and put to death on a CROSS. So what was going on there? The God and Father of us all was giving His Son over to terrible death—to identify with us at our worst, and in great love to take us sinners into himself and take away our sin and the sin of the whole world, and to bring us

to God in peace and righteousness. To do that for us, the Father was giving His Son—all that He had, holding nothing back. And the Son, knowing that's the way His Father is, likewise gave himself, his life, all that he had, holding nothing back. The Father and the Son were one in that life-giving action of love for us. And the Spirit was there too, expending all of God's resources—searching our depths, searching the depths of God—to enable this to happen (Heb. 9:14; 1 Cor. 2:10). And when Jesus rose on the third day, we knew that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit had triumphed in that life-giving action of love for us.

And once we know that, then we know that is how God always has been, always is, and always will be, like a mighty cascading waterfall. The Giver of all things, and the Giver of Himself. We see the whole of creation, and our own life, everything there is and everything we have, is the gift of God. We find ourselves in utter agreement with John the Baptist who once said, '*No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven*'—from God. Like the disciples we may still take a while to catch on to that. We might say, 'But what I've got, I've worked for—I've earned it myself'. Right . . . what have you used to work for it? Your brains, and your hands—did you make those? Did you go out to the shed and put your brain or your hands together? Before we were born, did any of us fill out an application form or pay up front for the privilege of having life? Does not life, and everything in it, come to us as a mysterious and wonderful gift? From God, the Giver of all, and the Giver of Himself to us.

What follows from that? I'll tell you one thing that doesn't follow from that. I once saw a picture of Jesus crucified, and

underneath was written: 'This I have done for thee—what doest thou for Me?' It gave me a terrible sinking feeling. That is not something that Jesus ever said. It's nowhere in the Bible. We are not required to repay God—how could we ever do that? That would be like standing at the bottom of the mighty waterfall and filling up our little cup and going up to the top and tipping it out back into the waterfall—how would that help?! God does not require us to give back to Him like that. What God does ask us to do is to *join God, with Him, in His giving*—to fill up our little cup at the foot of the great waterfall, and take it to where the water is most needed, and to do that again and again, knowing that it will never run out. And, if possible, to bring others to the great waterfall, so they can start doing the same. That's what God asks of us; that's what He's made us for; that's what life is really all about.

One little part of that: as far as the church is concerned. Today on this Thanksgiving Sunday, the Diocese is asking us to think about stewardship and 'stewardship' is a fancy word that the church uses, let's face it, for *giving money*—to the church. It is a good word, used in the Bible—it means looking after something that doesn't belong to you, for Someone else. But it is used in the church especially with regard to giving money. I have a friend who was converted while he was driving in the car, on a country road. He was listening to the radio, and he heard someone give a gospel message, and God turned his heart, and he became a believer in Christ—just like that. When he got to his motel in the next town, he found a Gideons Bible and he started reading it, and he found there that he needed to be baptised, so he went to a church and asked to be baptised, and he was. And then he started to learn what it was that

he'd come into. And one day he heard the preacher talking about giving as part of the Christian life, and he suddenly realised, 'Hey, giving your life to Christ is all very well, but this guy's after my *money*'. The cheek of him! But that's why the Diocese wants us to think about stewardship this Thanksgiving Sunday—the church is after our money! Well, it's part of the whole gift of life, isn't it? A pretty important one, since money can buy a lot of the things that we have, that are part of the whole gift of life. And what we do with our money can be a good indicator of how much we have cottoned on to what God is like, and how much we are participating in what God is doing.

One thing I've picked up since I came here—or even before I started here—is that the Diocese of Willochra's Church Office in Gladstone is a little bit jittery about our finances here in the Anglican Parish of Port Lincoln. Which is why we had Michael Ford here earlier in the year talking with us about stewardship and giving, and Ken Holden has been collecting people's pledges and promises to make sure we've got the finances covered. If you haven't done that yet, or if you would like to give more, I'm sure Ken would be glad to hear from you. One thing the Diocese has been saying is: don't expect a new priest to be appointed to Port Lincoln until you can show us that you can fully cover the cost. Ken Holden assures me we can do that easily. We're not short here! I heard of one former priest of this parish who said once that if we all had one less overseas trip each year—not no overseas trips at all but just one less each year—and we directed those resources to the mission of God, we'd be laughing! He said after that no one spoke to him for a month—he said it was a lovely quiet month! I reckon we could say to Church Office in Gladstone, 'Look,

we've got money coming out of our ears down here—of course we can cover our costs—what else would you like us to give to?!

Let me tell you a little bit of my experience of Christian stewardship. It started when I was quite young. There was a planned giving campaign in our church, and Mum and Dad had an envelope and they put their church money in that each week, and my oldest brother had an envelope for us kids. At that time I was getting five shillings pocket money a week (50 cents). The recommended suggested amount to give to the church was one tenth, because that figure is in the Bible, so each week I gave my big brother sixpence (5 cents—one tenth of 50 cents) to put into the family envelope. And as I grew up and married and our income has increased, we've kept on doing that—giving one tenth outside ourselves—ever since. Get into the habit of it, and it just becomes part of what you do—like having a shave or cleaning your teeth. It's not just a token gesture—it's a noticeable proportion of your income that you don't spend on yourself, as a way of acknowledging that all we have is the gift from God, it all belongs to Him, and we're just looking after some of it for a while, and are accountable to our God and Father for what we do with it. As we do that with a thankful heart, we find ourselves in the flow of God's great giving, and so we know it will never run out. And our experience—which includes fifteen years in a ministry that had no stipend or humanly guaranteed income—our experience is that it does not run out, but just keeps coming, in wonderful ways.

Maybe we think, shouldn't we leave the generous giving to those who have lots of money to give? My experience is that

it doesn't work that way, but people with the least are often the most generous. I remember years ago in a country town I was collecting for Austcare, the refugee appeal, and I went to one house that had two flash cars and a boat outside, and they grudgingly reached into their pocket and gave me 20 cents, and then I went to a little hovel of a shack where an old lady said, 'Oh, I've been waiting for you' and she gave me twenty dollars. Don't leave it to the other people—what is God saying to you? Do that, and you'll be in the right place.

Of course, we don't have to limit ourselves to one tenth. The great preacher John Wesley decided to live off some limited amount each year, and as his income steadily increased, he gave all the rest away. There was a group of people in the New Testament who at one stage were giving away more than they had—'beyond their means' St Paul says—so God must have been supplying it faster than they could give it away (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)! And you remember that time Jesus was in the temple watching all the rich people put in their gifts, and a poor widow put in two copper coins. And Jesus said, 'this poor widow has put in more than all of them . . . she . . . put in all she had to live on' (Luke 21:1-3). That poor widow must have known that as far as God is concerned there is always more where that came from.

So my message to you this morning is: don't be afraid to join God, with Him, in His giving. Come right up to the great cascading waterfall, fill up your little cup, and take it to where the water is most needed, and keep doing that again and again, and see if it ever runs out on you. And, while you're doing that, take the opportunity to tell others about

the great waterfall, and help to bring them to Him, so they can start doing the same. Because, as Jesus showed us, that's the way God really is, and that's what life is really all about.

Song

1. Father, what wonder abundant in all that You've made and You've done!
Mountains and oceans and deserts and moon and the stars and the sun,
Teeming with life, and with goodness and mercy that never will stop,
For Yours is a love that goes over the top!
What can our mean little kingdoms be worth,
When God in His glory fills heaven and earth?
2. Father, You've given Your Son, bringing more than we ever could wish—
Wine by the bucket, and bread by the basketful, boatloads of fish!
Bearing our sin in the Cross with the glory that shines from Your face,
He rose up from death to pour grace upon grace!
What could our mean little kingdoms be worth,
When God has brought all of His heaven to earth?
3. Father, You've poured out Your Spirit upon us to bring us all in—
Judging our foolishness, filling our emptiness, purging our sin!
Living in freedom and fullness of love in the life of Your Son,
Rejoicing in all that You've made and You've done!
What will our mean little kingdoms be worth,
When God has unveiled the new heaven and earth?

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