

Sermon 10

Topic: Responding to God's Bounty

Scripture Reading: Deut. 28:12; Psalm 145:16

Deut. 28:12 *"¹²The LORD will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow."*
NRSV

Psalm 145:16 *"¹⁶You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing."*

Introduction

The amazing quantity of food that is naturally produced is an astounding fact of nature. One simply has to traverse many of the rural communities in Jamaica during the ripening seasons of respective fruits to see this bounty. One particularly striking occurrence of the phenomenon is the ripening and natural harvesting of mangoes. All across Jamaica between the months of April to September, mangoes can be seen strewn along rural roadways, on hillsides and throughout the rural landscape. The sheer abundance of the natural harvest is often a thing of wonder. The same applies to other produce: apples, star-apples, breadfruit, avocado, pimento, jackfruit and plums, to name a few. This natural bounty is the basis of the livelihood of many Jamaicans who gather these products and offer them for sale in the local markets or in town centres. It is worthy of reiteration that no agricultural cultivation practices are rendered to many of these fruit-bearing trees, this all happens naturally. The amazing bounty is reflected also in the variety of food that the land produces. According to one website, there are no less than sixty-five names by which Jamaican mangoes are known! The variety of "apples" is also incredible: the Star apple, Pineapple, Rose apple, Custard apple, and the ever-popular, Otaheite apple are some that come to mind. Bananas come in multiple varieties as well and so do pears (avocado), plums and citrus fruits.

Organized agricultural cultivation is no less bountiful. The verdant yam hills of Trelawny, the voluminous vegetable farms of St. Elizabeth, the beautiful banana cultivations of St. Mary and the spacious and expansive sugarcane fields of St. Catherine, Clarendon and Westmorland all benefit from God's bountiful provision. The mineral-rich soils, the abundant rains, the sparkling sunshine and the potent pollination of insects, birds and the wind are all part of an intricate and bountiful system of provisioning which God has provided for the inhabitants of the earth in general and this beautiful land called Jamaica. Added to all this are the skills and experience of our trained agronomists and the traditional wisdom and experience of the rural farmers who understand the working of nature.

The Holy Scriptures are replete with testimonies and affirmations of the bountiful provisions of God for God's people. This narrative begins at the creation with God's provision for human beings and animals. The ensuing story of the Bible portrays God as benevolent and caring, who knows and provides for the needs of human beings. The texts which we have chosen are two such testimonials and affirmations of God's bountiful provision and gracious care. In the main text (Deut. 28), the people of God were poised on the verge of receiving the possession which had been promised to them. Their leader, Moses, took the opportunity to remind them of the wonderful demonstrations of care and protection of God and to admonish them to remember their covenantal relationship with God. In the last of his sermons, Moses highlighted how the Israelites were expected to live in their relationship with God and how, through God's promises, their lives and livelihood would be facilitated. Moses outlined to the people God's offer of blessing in response to their obedience and faithfulness. He indicated that the life that they would live would be solely based on either their connection with or disconnection from God. If they remained connected with God, God would open to them God's good treasures and bless their land with bounty. We in the modern world are called to hear these same messages for our lives today. We serve the same bountiful God who has promised to provide for us in bountiful ways.

Since we live in the largess and bounty of God, here are three ways in which we should respond.

1. Affirmatively **acknowledge** the source of our bounty.

Harvest season is a special time in most rural churches in Jamaica. It is the time when the community comes together in common acknowledgment of the provision of God. It is a time when the focus is placed on the source of the blessings which they have received. It is common to hear the strains of the wonderful Thanksgiving Hymn "We Plough the Fields" effusing from the sanctuaries as the people gather for the traditional Harvest event to pay homage to God their source and Provider. The refrain proclaims:

*All good things around us
Are sent from Heaven above,
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord
For all His love* (Matthias Claudius)

This hymn's writer unequivocally affirms that the source of the livelihood which emanates from the land is God. Israel likewise was reminded that God had provided for them and was told that God would continue to provide for them. They had no need to look elsewhere for support and sustenance, for provision and providence, for care and compassion except to God. Their source was God. In the same manner, the text calls our attention to the same source of our provisioning. We must be careful that we do not ignore this fact, that God is our source, for when we do so, we invite arrogance and conceit, the undoing and downfall of many. Furthermore, we must be careful not to erroneously ascribe the provision that we enjoy to any other being, such as ourselves. Too often we rise up in pride and egotistical self-centeredness and profess our own agency and ability to sustain ourselves. While there is a place for self-

confidence, it must be bounded by a healthy dose of the keen awareness of our ultimate reliance on God. Friends, we must not ignore God as our source nor ascribe this role to another being, for if we do so, we invite our own peril. When we do this, we risk spiritual degeneration and descent into social deterioration and destruction; the testimony of scripture and the history of God's people are adequate warnings of this. Instead, let us faithfully proclaim that God, our Rock of Ages, has been, remains and will forever be our Benevolent and Compassionate Provider, and the source of our bounty.

2. Wisely **appropriate** the provision of this bounty.

The vastness of God's provision is practically immeasurable. Yet with a finite world population, we still see inadequate supplies of food in various places and segments of societies. We see ineffective distribution channels and inequities in the access to and availability of food to large numbers of people. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated some of these systemic inequities and unfair arrangements. This state of affairs is inimical to the reality of the bountiful provisioning of God. God provides so that we may live and have a livelihood. The imposition of human greed and selfishness flies in the face of the benevolence of God. It is a betrayal of our common 'sibling-hood' as children of God. We must make wise use of the provisions of God in order to satisfy the needs of all members of the human family. We must ensure that hunger is a thing of the past because the production of food worldwide is sufficient to feed the world's population. In addition, we must make use of the provision of God in healthy, life-sustaining ways. We must take and consume only what we need and allow the unhindered enjoyment of others who will appropriate their portions. So, as we share and judiciously partake of God's provision, we ensure that there is equity and human dignity for all, irrespective of their status or creed.

3. Faithfully **ascribe** all honour to the Provider of this bounty

One of the purposes of ritual is to connect the human consciousness to a larger and transcendent reality. It serves to lift the human spirit to a higher plane where it encounters and reflects on the divine. We engage in rituals, therefore, not just for show or out of an uncritical commitment to tradition. Instead, ritual serves its purpose when it helps us to focus on God's grandness and what Soren Kierkegaard referred to as the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and humankind. This experience of the awesomeness of God points us to our own human dependency on God and the mediation of God's grace through the Son, Jesus Christ our Redeemer. We engage in ritual therefore in acknowledgement of God as Source and in our efforts to express our gratitude. Thanksgiving is an important element of Christian ritual. The effervescent poetry of the Psalms, the poignant prose of the narratives depicting God's dealings in the world and the powerful and authoritative teachings of the gospels in the words of Jesus, show us that thanksgiving is required by God and is the duty of believers.

It is no wonder that the Psalmist exclaims:

*“O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.” (Psalm 136:1 NRSV)*

Thanksgiving to God is an act of faith in God and an affirmation of the confessions which we believe and make about God as Provider and Sustainer. Thanksgiving is an act of acknowledgement and confession of the goodness of God. It is a public commendation of God’s character, attributes and activity. It is a public proclamation and testimony of what God has done and will do. When we give thanks to God, we are praising God in commendation of God’s nature. In all this, we ascribe honour to God who is our Provider, our Source.

So let us acknowledge the source of our bounty and stoutly affirm that it is God. Let us wisely appropriate this bounty and ensure that all members of our communities are supplied with what they need. Finally, let us ascribe the honour to God in fervent thanksgiving for all of God’s bountiful goodness to us.

Amen.