

50th Anniversary Independence Service
November 27, 2016

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

When this verse was written some twenty-six hundred years ago, it was addressed to a community that had memories of a past defined by slavery and liberation, by some very good times and some not so good times.

It was a past with great national heroes like Moses, Joshua and David and Deborah and Ruth. But there were also those persons who had not pulled their weight in making the country the best that it could have been.

The community was now faced with some daunting challenges in the present, but was hoping for a better future. It seemed as if all they had accumulated, all they had built up over the years, was now slipping away.

And in this context of uncertainty, fear and the loss of faith, there were the sages who produced Deuteronomy, refusing to believe that the memories of the past and the experiences of the present could determine every detail of the future. For there was hope.

The community that produced Deuteronomy held dearly to the conviction that hope has a way of taking the memories of the past and the experiences of the present, and shaping them into a powerful force that could assist with the creation of a far better future. Hope still has this power.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our Independence, we need to acknowledge and also embrace the power of hope. We do so with the memories of the past and experiences of the present rooted in our minds. We do so convinced that the memories and the experiences of the past need not determine our future. For hope enables us to set new goals and pursue them with vigour and determination.

In our efforts to reach our goals, it will often seem as if we are making a few steps forward and a few backward, to do a variation on one of our famous calypsos. But we should press on.

We press on because we know that success and set backs are integral parts of the experience we call life. The admittance that there are challenges in our way to further progress is not an excuse for failure to attain many of our goals, or an indication of any reluctance to work harder towards them.

It is rather, an acknowledgement that we have to make a greater effort, sometimes an extra effort to make things better, given the fact that in this life there are few paths to success that enable us to circumvent the hurdles that are in our way as we push towards our goals.

As we examine our country at this time, we see the hurdles that face us. But these are not insurmountable barriers. Let us see them as challenges in our way to further progress, challenges that with the grace of God and a renewed and energised Barbadian drive for success, we can conquer.

In this our fiftieth year of independence, let us, first of all, pause and reflect on how far we have travelled in the last fifty years. Pause, reflect, and give thanks to Almighty God.

As a nation, we have not sat back and allowed the tide of time, the currents of history and the predictions of the worse, to sweep us along. We have made every effort to be

Strict guardians of our heritage

and

firm craftsmen of our fate.

This is the spirit we need in these challenging times. It emerges out of that gritty Barbadian, level-headed, driven resilience that has allowed us to keep pushing forward during the past fifty years, and just look at what we have achieved. Look at how far we have come.

We have taken on the world, and have defied one strand of the theory of development that suggests there must be access to a given level of natural resources if a country is to surge ahead. We have done it in another way. We have invested heavily in our people, our primary resource.

Barbadians have settled in the United States, England, and Canada, and before this in Trinidad, Guyana, Panama and Cuba, and they have been good ambassadors for their country.

They have channelled money into the economy of this country and so have contributed significantly to the development of several areas of Barbadian society.

Without the traditional resources we have climbed the ladder of development and can stand proudly among the nations of the world. Yes, we have been punching above our weight as one noble citizen of the world once remarked.

By any standard, we have done remarkably well. On our fiftieth anniversary of Independence, WE HAVE A LOT TO CELEBRATE. We have a lot for which we need to thank Almighty God.

To conclude otherwise – to conclude that there is nothing to celebrate at this time is to ignore the steps forward this country has taken and the success it has achieved during the last fifty years.

But we dare not sit back and rest on our achievements. There is far too much work to be done. There are those among us who seem not to be able to experience their fair share of the fruits of national development. We cannot overlook or ignore them. Their welfare must be high on our national agenda.

We must continue with earnest to address our present challenges, whether, it is the delivery of adequate supplies of water, or access to jobs, or the collection of refuse, or simply a lack of confidence that is necessary to push us on to another level of national development. We must adequately address the problems we are facing in our country and press forward to better times.

What we are facing are Barbadian problems and we dare not label them otherwise. Yes, the source of some of them and some of the influences that drive them may be beyond these shores, and beyond our control, but they have landed in our lap and we have to address them.

All of us will agree that those whom we have put in charge of the affairs of our country must be held to the highest level of responsibility in dealing with the problems we are facing.

But if we devolve into small inward looking interest groups and classes and parties and point fingers, then we will not be able to engage in the problem solving process as efficiently and as effectively as we should.

We can so easily become stuck where we are far longer that we would like. We will waste precious time and energy talking about who should be blamed for our problems instead of doing as much as we can to solve them.

The collection of sages who produced for us the book of Deuteronomy, found the courage to address the problems their people were facing. They identified a way forward, and provided for their people then and for us today, a template for addressing difficult national issues without letting go of hope.

It is one that is as relevant this evening as it was when it was first formulated more than two thousand, six hundred years ago. It involves strengthening and generating confidence.

There is what the younger generation would describe as a bit of ‘bigging up’. So Vss 6-7 of our first lesson read:

..... just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. ⁶ You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” ⁷ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?

Not an attempt to prove they were better than all the rest, but an effort to remind the people that there is a long and solid tradition upon which they could stand and build. They could be and indeed should be proud of who they were.

Their template for success is supported by efforts to strengthen confidence. It consists of three pillars upon which any nation can stand secure especially in times of challenge. It is surely one with a message for us as we celebrate our 50th year of independence.

These pillars are:

A deep sense of history

The acceptance by each citizen of the responsibility to make their country as good as it can be

And.....Hope.

It is not surprising then that the book begins with a survey of the nation's history. By so doing, it is making the point that a nation's history is more than a collection of the stories of past events. It is also a book of lessons that can speak to the present and empower citizens to shape the future.

And so this evening we can ask ourselves the following question:

What have we learnt as a nation from our history, especially from the experiences of the past fifty years?

The journey that we have travelled during these years is one that is brim full of lessons and insights. The primary ones tell of how with just a little it is possible to create much. Not unlike the story of the little boy in the Gospel who entrusted Jesus with his lunch of five loaves and two fishes and these fed many.

Do we as Barbadians still have this conviction about the possibility of transforming little into much by honest hard work, as our parents and grandparents and great grandparents did?

Here is a lesson from our history that we should never allow to die. It is one that says that starting with a little as so many of us did fifty years ago, is not an anchor to the point at which we start, but only a platform and an incentive to move on.

This is the primary lesson from our history that we need to teach the young. We need to teach our children from the earliest stage in their lives that it is possible to achieve, and where we start need not be an indicator of where we will end. This is the hope we need to enkindle in each generation.

As we offer our special thanks to Almighty God for all the many blessings he has showered upon us during the past fifty years, and long before, we are doing so very conscious of the fact that these blessings have shaped our lives and our country during this time.

What blessings have you received during the past fifty years? We all tend to dwell on the setbacks and the missed opportunities and complain, and complain about these. But what about the blessings? When last did you count yours and thank God for them?

There must be something during the past fifty years for which each Barbadian can thank God at this time. Think about it. For surely, in spite of the chorus we often hear, that claims we have nothing to celebrate at this time we have a lot, a lot to celebrate.

For those under fifty, it can be, being born in this wonderful country of ours during one of the most exciting times of our history, the period of Independence. It is a time during which we experienced a peaceful social revolution that made decent housing, the right to that lot in the Tenantry on which we and our parents and grandparents lived, a good secondary education, piped water into our homes, an expanded health care system, and much more, readily available to every Barbadian.

We can count this as a privilege. No matter what have been our experiences, during the past fifty years, there is something special about this country, that we should never ignore or dismiss.

For many of us there has been the creation of families, and with joy watching our children grow, and ushering them along into adulthood. There is something special in your life, in my life, that took place during the past fifty years for which we ought to be thankful. Let us thank God for all this.

What blessings have you received during the past fifty years? What is there about your life during this time for which you can be eternally grateful to Almighty God?

For surely our history during the period of Independence cannot be written, cannot be understood, without identifying the progress we have made and the many good things that we have achieved and experienced.

We look back and we can travel step by step through the era of independence, not to reside in the past, but in search of the gems of wisdom along the way that can help us to deal with the realities of today.

We look back recalling the struggles and the efforts of all those who have shaped this country into the gem that it is today, there were also some difficult times but these should not blot out the good times whether at the personal or the national level.

As we thank Almighty God for his many gifts, personal and national, let us also think about the responsibility these place upon us. Let each of us accept the responsibility

..... *To make our country as good as it can be (and)*

We begin as we try to do so, by ensuring that we avoid what is very easy to do sometimes, highlight all the negatives, and ignore the positives. This evening let us treat the past fifty years as a mixture of the two, seeing them both as connecting us to God whose grace is sufficient for us every time we meet a hurdle in life, and whose blessings never cease to flow.

Let us hold on to those good experiences without converting them into an escape hatch were we may believe we can hide and be shielded from the realities of the present, dwelling far too long on 'how good it was yesterday' instead of working to make it better today.

We need to be ever conscious of our responsibility as adults to take care of this good land in a way that will ensure we hand it on to our children and grandchildren, to the next generation in a condition that is far better than the one in which we received it. We must do all we can to make our country as good as it can be.

This calls on each of us to keep clear of the attitude and the behaviour that suggest that it is all about what I want, it is all about me. For surely individualism in all its manifestation is the greatest threat to strong community and nation building.

As we stand at the end of our first fifty years of independence, and cast our eyes into the future along the path that will lead to the celebration of the next fifty, our centenary, each Barbadian must pause at this juncture and ask ourselves two important questions:

1. What type of Barbados do I want built during the next fifty years
2. What contribution can I make to achieve this?

These questions do not launch us into an exercise of abstract thinking, but into one that should lead each of us to examine our lives and to identify what we are doing even now to make this country better.

Fifty years ago, in this fair land, there was a dream, there was hope. When the Broken Trident replaced the Union Jack, on that eventful night that was touched with some showers of blessings, there was a dream, there was hope that was set alive.

It was a dream that we could take this little rock with its many social issues, with its collection of rural villages with their rustic way of life, with its plantations with their hard working labourers, and mould it into a community of people driven by the conviction that each of us bolstered by the gritty Barbadian spirit and guided by God, could make it to another level if we try.

This was our great hope. Indeed it was nearly all that many of us of that generation fifty years ago had to stand on. And we built on it. It propelled us beyond where we were at that time, to places and to conditions and to positions we could hardly imagine were possible. There was hope.

At this juncture in our history, we need to bolster this flame of hope that has propelled this nation to where we are today. We need to enkindle it in the minds of the young. We need to help them to embrace the conviction that they can be better tomorrow than they are today, that their dreams can come true and their hope can be realized.

Hope must not be short circuited by the option for quick acquisition of material gain, especially when this is done through questionable means. For hope pulls us into the future along a path that is honest and true. It can guide us through some rugged paths, and keep us going with the conviction that we can make it, if we keep going.

Let us keep going as individuals and as a nation. Let us keep going in spite of the challenges, searching for answers, exploring new solutions. Let us keep going with our faith grounded in God and for us Christians, in Jesus Our Lord. We do so thanking God for the many wonderful things he has done in our nation and in our lives.

It is only through his grace that we are here today. Let us all therefore on this day and for the rest of our lives heed the advice of the writers of Deuteronomy and

*bles the LORD (your) our God for the good land
that he has given (you.) us*