

“BLESS YOU!”
Numbers 6:22-27

Every now and then, there creeps into the language a new word – or a new use of an old word – that soon becomes extremely irritating. Usually such words are the province of the young and arrive here via soaps from America or Australia, where they are strangers to the real shape and beauty of the English language. But in recent months people of all ages – and usually older people who ought to know better – have taken to using the single word “Bless!” to express something along the lines of “Aren’t they sweet?”, often as a small child or apparently adorable puppy (there’s an oxymoron if ever I heard one) is doing something hopelessly appalling. Of course, we have used the phrase “Bless you!” as a response to sneezes and sometimes as a way of expressing thanks for centuries now – and that probably was as irritating when it first started to be used. But the word “Bless” or “Blessing” was originally used to communicate something very serious and, indeed, powerful.

We’ve used that word this morning in our thanksgiving for Amelia and Madalyn. It came in those familiar words we used earlier on to ask God to watch over them. And we have read those same words and heard them sung, too, in a form which is probably very familiar to many of us. As you will have gathered from the “reading” this morning, they are taken directly from the Bible, from the book of *Numbers* in the Old Testament. In many ways *Numbers* may seem a very boring book – it’s full of regulations and lists – but it helps us to understand something of the way in which the people of Israel constituted themselves as they prepared to repopulate the land God had promised them on their escape from Egypt. And the words we’re focusing on this morning are what is known as “The Aaronic Blessing” – the words that Aaron the High Priest was to use to affirm God’s blessing of his people as they became a nation.

As I’ve said, they are words that are probably familiar to many of us. We may well have heard them used before in the context we’ve used them in this morning. We may have heard them in other settings – maybe a wedding service. We may have read them in liturgies and seen them referred to in other books. Even in our English translation they have a certain ring to them. And in the original Hebrew they are very carefully constructed poetry. The three phrases are cleverly balanced. In Hebrew there are three words in the first phrase, five in the second and seven in the third. The parts of speech used are skilfully arranged. They were obviously intended to be memorable.

So this is a solemn affirmation. It is not a begging prayer or a cry of desperation. It is a clear reminder to the people over whom they were said that God wants to bless them. This is about God’s relationship with his creatures, with men and women, with you and me. That is emphasised again in the Hebrew by the fact that the word for “you” is singular in each case. This is about God and each of his children. He wants to bless each of us personally. It is intended to emphasise that God really wants to do this. As one writer put it, “*Blessing is God’s idea, his purpose. It is not something his people must beg for, but it is the outreaching of his grace.*” (Ronald B Allen *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*). These are words of promise, of reassurance, of love. And they are not just for Amelia and Madalyn this morning, but for all of us. Let’s reflect on them for a few moments.

1. “THE LORD BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU”

“Bless” is a huge word with such tremendous meaning behind it. We sing sometimes about blessing God, about our honouring him. But we cannot ever hope to compete with God’s blessing of us. In this word are summed up all the other things we’re going to go on and talk about as we look at the other parts of this poetic affirmation. It is about God positively giving us the very best of his provision. For the people who first heard these words, God’s blessing was very often identified in actual physical, material ways. God was seen as blessing people with children, with flocks, with crops, with long life and so on. But it actually goes well beyond that, well beyond simply doling out the goods. It involves every part of our being – as we shall see in a bit.

Blessing is the positive side to the coin, the other side of which is God's keeping. This is to do not with God's providing with good things, but with his guarding from bad things. The God who loves his creatures, who watches over humanity, can also protect them from the effects and consequences of evil. If you read through the Old Testament, you will see how again and again God ensured that his people (in the long run) are kept from real harm. Of course, there were times when they decided that they did not want God's intervention, that they weren't prepared to trust in him and they tried to walk away from his protection. But through the words of his prophets, through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Haggai and all the others, God tried to reassure his rebellious people that he wanted only the best for them, that he wanted to "*bless and keep them*".

And he still does. God still wants to bless you, to pour out the abundance of his provision on you. All of us here today experience a good deal of that – whether we acknowledge it or not. And for those who are prepared to take him at his word and trust him to keep them, there is the promise that, in the end, he will ensure that you are kept safe. As Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, "*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him*" (Romans 8:28).

2. **"THE LORD MAKE HIS FACE TO SHINE UPON YOU AND BE GRACIOUS TO YOU"**

There are some people, aren't there, of whom it is said that their smile lights up the room. Some people just have a radiant smile and the warmth of that smile for those they love is quite uplifting. And when they turn that smile on you, you feel a sense of warmth and cheer. That's what this is about: God smiles on you, at you.

I'm sure we all have our own mental image of God. We know, of course, that he isn't really a kind of souped-up human being, that he really is beyond our imagining, but to try and make sense of him, to try and make him real in our minds, we conjure up a picture of him. Very probably that image is based on an actual picture – William Blake's *Ancient of Days*, the muscular old man reaching down with his set of dividers into a stormy world: Michelangelo's stern and white-bearded old man reaching out to touch Adam's fingers. It may be based on what you have read of God – thundering from the mountain top as he gives Moses the Ten Commandment: roaring into the world to remind humanity of his majesty: speaking judgment through his prophets and preachers. I rather doubt that your image of God is of a smiling friend, delighted to see you and drawing you into relationship with him by the sincerity of his smile.

But that is the image of God we have here. Our God, the God whom we affirm blesses us, who watches over Amelia and Madalyn – and their parents and their family and their friends – is not a God who is always waiting for us to make a mistake so that he can pounce on us with an angry rebuke. He is not a God who frowns and condemns, who snarls and shouts at us. Some of the most powerful passages about God's judgement are to be found in the Old Testament, in the words of the prophets whom we have already mentioned. And there are a few instances in the New Testament too. But read them carefully. Look at what God is really saying. He is expressing his disappointment, his deep hurt when the people he loves turn away from him. God weeps over the sins of his people. He weeps because he knows that, before anyone had ever done anything wrong, he promised that he would have to deal with that wrongdoing, hoping against hope that it would never happen. But humanity did rebel, did go against him and he now has to keep his word and deal with the evil that has resulted. Through the tears which he sheds for this broken world, he smiles on you. He loves you.

That's why we affirm that he is "*gracious to you*". God shows his grace, his unmerited favour on his people. Look at the Old Testament once more – again and again God reaches out to restore the very people who have disobeyed him, who have rejected his love, who have turned away from his smiling face. Were God like us, he would get to the point of saying, "Stuff it, then! Have it your way. I can't be bothered with you any more." And then he'd leave us to rot in the mess of our own making. But, praise

him! God is not like us. He keeps smiling that smile of everlasting love. He keeps pouring out his grace on us. He keeps on trying to woo us back to him – again and again and again.

You see, once you start thinking of God as a grumpy old man who just wants to condemn us all the time, you really don't want anything to do with him. You decide that's not the God who's likely to bless you and you walk away. But start thinking of God's face shining upon you, God's face lighting up with a smile just at the thought of you, God looking at you with the kind of love and grace that you've never fully experienced before, and then you'll want to start to walk towards him, to throw yourself into his arms, to feel the awesome power of his love for you.

3. **“THE LORD TURN HIS FACE TOWARDS YOU AND GIVE YOU PEACE”**

Here's another little idiom. To say that you were turning your face towards someone meant for the Hebrew that you were giving them your full attention. God's giving you his full attention – and remember that this “you” is singular. If you're omnipotent and omnipresent and all the rest, you can do that; you can give your full attention to each individual at the same time! You matter to God. He loves you. He smiles on you. He pays attention to you. He wants the very best for you. Never, ever believe those who try to tell you – for whatever reason – that you don't matter to him, that he doesn't really care about you.

God cares about you so much that he wants to give you his “*peace*”. The Hebrew word that is translated by that is “*shalom*”. It means a heck of a lot more than what we mean by peace. It means complete well-being – physical, material, emotional, mental, psychological, spiritual. This is all about being just as God originally intended you to be, for now and for eternity. It's what Jesus was talking about when he told his listeners that he had come to bring them “*life in all its fullness*” (*John10:10*).

That's difficult, perhaps, for us to imagine – complete well-being, holistic health and serenity. In a world which seems to be characterised by violence and injustice, by brokenness and selfishness – in your own part of that world which is defined by stress and anxiety and resentment and hurt – the offer of *shalom* must seem so much fantasy. But here it is in this blessing, this affirmation. It's what God wants you to have, it's his offer to you. You can have a sense of peace now and a real assurance about your eternal future, too. What is it that causes so much anxiety to so many people? What is the thing that weighs most heavily on their minds? I reckon it's the thought of what's going to happen at the end of this life, it's the subconscious (but nonetheless real) worry that one day we will all have to stand before our Creator and Judge. And if your image of him is of that vindictive old man who just wants to sweep you off into oblivion – or worse, into hell – then it's not an inviting prospect. But if you envisage meeting that smiling face, the face of someone who really loves you, then it becomes a prospect that is a whole lot more inviting.

When God says he is going to do something, he means it. If he promises his blessing, his smile, his attention, his *shalom*, then he will deliver. And to prove how serious he is in that, he came into our world in the person of Jesus the Christ, and lived as a human being. So he knows what it's like to have to cope with the mess and misery that can fill our lives. He knows how we enjoy life and how we struggle with it. And after thirty years of doing that he was executed, crucified on a rough wooden cross, somehow taking with him there all the hurt, all the pain, all the consequences of our wrong decisions and inept choices. And the “you” in it all is singular again – Jesus did it for you. He did it to ensure that your anxiety about the eternal future could be resolved, to enable you to see that smile of the face of God, to try and convince you that you matter to him.

Those words we used this morning are not just a nice set of wishes for Amelia and Madalyn, they are the promises of a God who wants you to know that he loves you, that he cares about you, that he smiles on you, that he has made the ultimate sacrifice to assure you of how serious he is about it all. Now, you can walk out of here this morning and say “What a nice service!” (or, indeed, “What a waste of time!”), treat

these words as if some doting Aunt or drooling Grandmother had looked at you and said “Ah, bless!” and ignore all that God has promised you here. Or you can think carefully about that God who has called out to you this morning and decide that you really do want to feel the warmth of his smile and experience the *shalom* he offers. No-one else can make that decision for you – but if you want to find out a bit more, have a word with me afterwards and we’ll try and point you in the right direction.

(Discussion notes follow on next page)

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think this blessing is so popular?
2. What do we actually mean by "blessing"? What do you mean when you say "God bless you" to someone?
3. How have you experienced God's blessing in your life?
4. Why is our image of God more often one of judgement and sternness than that of a smiling face?
5. Why does God keep trying to reach out to us? Do you think there ever comes a point when he gives up on someone? Why/why not?
6. What do you understand by *shalom*? How have you experienced it?
7. How would you try to convince someone that they matter to God?