

Blessing (Numbers 6:22-27, Psalm 20, Mark 10:13-16)

Last in series today on what we can learn from God's people in OT about 'The Good Life'. Along way, learned that it's a life of praise, of hospitality, of appropriate rest (i.e. Sabbath), of making good where things were broken, of offering refuge, and of celebration, freedom and justice for all.

Final week – word 'blessing'. Probably of all words, one we hear most often in church or Christian circles. If go to a traditional church, usually finish with a blessing. But otherwise quite vague:

- We'll say 'God bless you' but not really sure what we mean by that – often not much more than 'hope it goes well'.
- Sometimes, it sort of means 'leave me alone' – God can bless you but I won't!
- Sometimes it comes in the context of some mishap, and we'll say 'awwww, bless.' In other words this particular unfortunate individual is in special need of some help from God.
- Most often, use it when someone sneezes – as if in special need of blessing when inhale some dust or have a touch of hay fever. Really?

So it's kind of a flabby word isn't it – used so often that we're not sure if it really means anything, or maybe works as a kind of a vague warm phrase to use. It's a *beige* word, isn't it?

So let's use today to recover a sense of what the word *really* means – and then we can start to use it in a real way. Actually an amazing word, a powerful word (definitely *not* beige), goes to heart of our relationship with God and world. People of God are a people of blessing – let's unpack that and be inspired to be people of blessing today.

Blessing goes right back to beginning – Gen 1: God blesses fish and birds (v22 interesting blessed creation even before appearance of people) – then blesses people v28. So **from beginning of creation, God is a God who blesses**. He blesses Noah in Gen 9, and then famously Abram in Gen 12. What makes this so significant is not just that he promises to bless Abram and family – but that 'all nations will be blessed through you.' So even by Gen 12, God blesses creation, individuals but also a promise to bless the whole world. In short, God likes blessing things.

But what does the word mean? At its heart, to bless is to bestow God's goodness on something or someone. For us today, that has a dual meaning, doesn't it? Sometimes when we bless we offer a concrete sign of that goodness – we do something practical to help them. At other times, when we bless it's more of a prayer, naming things we'd like someone to experience, perhaps more in hope than expectation.

If go back to OT, for people of Israel, blessing was very much understood as real, tangible benefits – not just 'wishful thinking' but actual, hard-and-fast signs of God's goodness. So as one scholar Harry Mowvley commented, blessing was 'a solemn, deliberate act through which specific and concrete advantages are conveyed.' Blessing meant real stuff, real signs of God's favour. Actually see this in Psalm we read – concrete blessings in shape of help, answered prayers, successful plans and victory in times of struggle. Raymond Brown comments on this idea further like this: QUOTE p57.

So when we turn to that beautiful blessing in Numbers 6, we need to have this in the back of our mind. Context here is that God has given the law and God's people are about to set out on their journey to the promised land. So this is not a rose-tinted, soft-focus, violins-in-the-background moment, like we often imagine 'moments of blessing' to be. A long, hard, dangerous, uncertain journey lay ahead, and into this testing situation God speaks a beautiful word of encouragement to his people.

What can we learn from it today? (turn to p141) – READ

First, only God blesses – in other words, life's best gifts and most important gifts only come from God. In text twice, isn't it: v24 The Lord bless you / v27 I will bless them. So when we 'bless' people, we are really pointing them to God's goodness. We are doing or declaring things for them that point them to God and his love. We are the go-betweens, if you like.

In practical terms, God largely delegates his work of showing people his love and goodness through us. We can speak that kind word, we can help someone, we can remind them of God's love and favour. Yes, he also does stuff that only he can do – but as the whole story of the bible shows, much of the time, he lets us be his eyes and ears, his hands and feet, his heart and voice in the world.

It reminds us too not to waste our time running after lots of other things, looking to find blessing – i.e. favour and goodness. It's the Lord who blesses.

Second, blessing is not about what we want but what God gives – or in many cases, has already given. Which is not to say that what he gives isn't stuff we wanted – as we'll see, the prayer of blessing meets our deepest needs. But blessing is not wish fulfilment. When we bless we declare things that we know God gives. In many cases, he has already given them, and we are just reminding ourselves of the fact. When Aaron prays over Israel, 'the Lord bless you and keep you,' he's saying that *after* God has kept Israel from hand of Pharaoh and his armies, from starvation in the desert. In other words, He's already 'keeping' them – let's just keep reminding ourselves and trusting him to continue to do it.

Third, God particularly blesses what he owns. Don't like word ownership – fine for *us* to own stuff like sofas and smartphones, but not for *God* to own *us*. But that is the language of v27 (READ). The idea of God putting his name on us, is really the language of ownership. Much like some of you will be writing your children's names onto their school clothing this week. It denotes ownership. But again, God's ownership is about blessing. God doesn't treat us like most of us treat our phones – God doesn't lose us behind the sofa, scratch us in his pocket with the keys, drop us down the toilet. What does God's ownership, i.e. blessing mean instead?

Words of this blessing in Number 6 cover it perfectly:

Keep – same word used in Exodus for guarding – in other words, means 'protect'. Israel especially needed to hear this as set out on dangerous journey. God doesn't spare us from those tough journeys, but he does promise to keep us on those journeys.

Protection, then pleasure: **Make his face to shine upon** you. Beautiful image, metaphor for supreme pleasure. God's favour is not given grudgingly, he delights in us, and so we bless others by reminding them of that. Perhaps word for you today is to imagine God's face shining on you.

Forgiveness: **'be gracious'**. God's perfect love and holiness mean that we regularly need his grace – i.e. his mercy and forgiveness. Again, this is something God has already promised – but it's one thing to know that in our heads, another to believe it in our hearts. Know that God is gracious to you, because his face shines upon you.

Last 2 are connected: **'turn his face towards you and give you peace'**. To understand idea of 'turning face towards' need to think about opposite. Occasionally, Israel's neglect of their relationship with God was so bad that God turned his face away. So when we declare God's face being turned towards us, it is another image of mercy and gentle favour – and the outcome of that is where the blessing concludes i.e. peace. If God is for us, we can know peace.

Though actually, 'peace' is a bit limited – word is shalom. If did Freedom in Christ course in May-June, you'll know that shalom is much bigger than peace: means wholeness, or complete wellbeing. May God give you complete wellbeing. What a big blessing that is!

So just to pick up briefly on gospel passage in Mark, when Jesus blesses children, we can imagine him saying the sorts of things we find in Numbers 6. And it reminds us that Jesus blesses these children just like God blesses his children – his people – in the OT. **And of course, in our baptism just now, I've just blessed Thomasina in a similar way / And of course, in the baptisms of Archie and Teddy a few weeks ago, Keith and I will have blessed them in a similar way** – May Almighty God deliver you... (i.e. keep you), restore in you... (i.e. turn towards you and be gracious) and lead you... (i.e. shine his face and grant you complete wellbeing, complete shalom).

As we close, what does all this mean for us today?

Well, simple conclusion is that **we are called to be people of blessing** i.e. people who show and declare God's goodness to others, who are signs, if you like, of God's goodness. And this is not just for priests. The Apostle Peter reminds us in the bible that we are all a 'royal priesthood' – so what only Aaron could do in OT, we can all do now. We can all bless others! (Confession: one of bits of CofE theology that I profoundly disagree with is bit that says that only ordained minister can pronounce blessing at end of service – we're all priests now, so we can all bless!)

Simple applics: don't devalue language of blessing. Think about times you use phrase 'bless you' – is that what you really mean? Maybe use some other phrase, or perhaps even better, every time you do use it, take a moment to pray a prayer of real blessing over that person you just said it to.

Positively, recover value of declaring blessing. God is good, and he loves to show his goodness to his children. So don't be afraid to declare it, just like Aaron did over Israel. Our conversations with each other could easily include a lot more blessing, couldn't they?

Finally, don't forget that blessing in OT is a concrete thing. It means practical benefits. So to be true people of blessing, our calling is to show God's goodness in practical ways to others. How can you bless others this week?