

Mixed blessings...
Jeremiah 17: 5-10; Luke 6: 17-31
 Epiphany 6, 17 February 2019
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Bless you!

Chances are, the last time you heard those words they were said in response to somebody sneezing,

Or else they were spoken to express gratitude for something you or somebody else had done.

For some reason "bless you" belongs to that group of words and phrases that people tend to say automatically in certain situations, without really stopping to ponder what the expression means.

In the case of my first example, the original meaning is rather interesting.

A website I discovered a few years ago listed no fewer than five possible origins of the practice of saying "bless you" in response to a sneeze.¹

Apparently there was a time when people used to believe that the soul could be thrust from the body through the act of sneezing.

To prevent this from happening, a witness to the sneeze would say 'bless you' to safeguard the temporarily expelled and vulnerable soul from being snatched up by Satan (who was always lurking nearby).

In some cultures, the heart was believed to stop momentarily during a sneeze (I'm reliably informed that it doesn't), thus the "Bless you!" was uttered either as a prayer for life to return or as a congratulation upon its successful restart.

Others claim an association of the practice with particular diseases (most often the bubonic plague, or "Black Death," as it is sometimes known).

They say an infected person's sneeze was a sure sign that the grim reaper was coming, so the "Bless you!" was intended as a benediction to the nearly-departed, a way of commending his or her soul to the care of God.

Then there are those who believe that sneezes are in themselves lucky or foretell good fortune – or blessings - coming the sneezer's way.

Finally, some see the sneeze as a blessing bestowed by the sneezer upon the 'recipient' (sneeze?)

Answering a sneeze with "Bless you!" is seen as nothing more remarkable than replying "Good morning!" to the person who has just greeted you with the same phrase.

In other words, people using the phrase "bless you" now are not necessarily implying anything about God, religion, or the sneezer's state of blessedness;

They are in all probability simply being 'nice'.

And that's awkward, because "niceness" doesn't figure prominently in what Jesus had to say about blessing,

And neither was the writer of Jeremiah being 'nice' when he wrote the words we heard in our first reading today.

For the authors of Jeremiah and Luke's Gospel, "to bless" had a quite particular religious and social meaning, as did its apparently polar opposite, to curse.

Today's readings from the book of Jeremiah and Luke's Gospel represent two attempts to come to grips with these expressions, and to relate them to life in the real world.

What did it mean for a person to be blessed or cursed in Jeremiah's or Jesus' culture?

¹ <http://www.snopes.com/language/phrases/blessyou.asp>

What, if anything, does it mean to people like us when we hear these words now?
 Does "blessed" simply mean "happy" - as in some translations of these passages -
 Or is there more to blessedness than meets the human eye/I?
 Is it possible to be blessed and yet not be happy?
 Is happiness a universal human right, or an optional state of mind?
 Whilst it's certainly true that human beings can choose to be happy,
 It is also true that for many millions of people, a miserable and often tragically shortened existence is not their choice at all.
 The problem of undeserved human suffering calls the whole concept of blessing seriously into question,
 Especially in light of the fact that the Judaeo-Christian tradition has sometimes linked suffering of any sort with being cursed by God.
 That's the line taken by Job's so-called friends and advisors,
 And it seems to be the line being taken by Jeremiah in our first reading today.
 One commentator notes that this wisdom psalm evokes confidence that right and blessing, wrong and curse stand in automatic relationship in the world.
 Experience, of course, teaches otherwise.
 We all know that good things don't always happen to good people;
 If "blessed" means "enjoying God's favour" and God's favour is reflected in the presence of plenty and the absence of suffering,
 Then plenty of Godly people would seem to be missing out.
 Jeremiah hints at the difficulty of drawing conclusions about people's "blessedness" from their external circumstances, by noting the deviousness of the human heart.
 We are all quite capable of interpreting events to suit our own particular view of reality,

And we should all be well aware of how dangerous the belief that "God blesses/favours us" can be, especially in our day and age.
 Jeremiah tries to resolve the problem of human deceitfulness by making God the final arbiter of all things spiritual;
 It is God who tests the mind and searches the heart.
 God rewards people according to the fruit of their doings, he says -
 But to me, that sounds suspiciously like a divinely sanctioned form of user pays...
 So what are we supposed to do with this biblical talk of cursing and blessing?
 Is it part of a way of looking at the world that we could and should leave behind?
 There's a large part of me that would like to take that approach and develop it for the rest of this sermon.
 There's a significant part of me that wants, if I'm honest, to portray God as a kind of supernatural Switzerland:
 Benign, efficient, politically neutral, and not overly concerned with the day to day running of the world.
 Such an approach would however put me at odds with my understanding of Jesus' teaching, particularly as it's expressed in today's Gospel text.
 For Jesus, God clearly is concerned about the day to day running of life on this planet,
 And what's more, God is not politically, socially, or economically neutral at all.
 But Jesus' sense of God's place in human proceedings, Jesus' sense of whom and what God favours, is not what the crowd gathered around him was expecting.

As a number of biblical commentators have noted, Jesus' thoughts on curses and blessings take the accepted standards and turn them upside down.²

It simply doesn't make sense to describe poor, hungry, grieving and excluded people as "blessed", if blessedness means happy - unless that blessedness or happiness relates to a future state, something that happens in another world.

And of course that has been a popular interpretation of this text within the Christian tradition,

Often linked with some powerful arguments in support of the political, social and economic status quo.

In its extreme form, this amounts to telling poor, hungry, miserable and excluded people that the best they can do is put up with it, because in heaven they'll receive compensation for the hellish time they've had here on earth.

It's interesting to ponder what Jesus might say to this kind of interpretation.

Would the man who outspokenly challenged oppressive religious and social practices and was ultimately put to death for it really want his followers to take such things lying down?

Sure, Jesus didn't start a purely political movement.

He didn't ride the crest of the wave of his Palm Sunday popularity all the way to the top of the political heap;

He didn't form an Army, or endorse the use of force against the occupying power of Rome.

But he didn't shrink from calling so-called accepted norms and values into question either,

Which raises the possibility that if we're going to call ourselves his followers,

Then neither should we.

So what does following Jesus mean, in the light of the Beatitudes, that pithy and provocative collection of curses and blessings that we heard this morning?

How might we respond, if we were hearing his voice from the midst of that mountainside crowd?

To answer that question, we need to picture some of the people who had come from all over the surrounding countryside to hear and see Jesus.

Some of them were hungry.

Many of them were literally poor, shamed by having to beg for money and food to get them through the day.

Many of them were also literally mourning:

Mourning the loss of loved ones, killed in the ongoing conflict against the Romans;

Mourning the loss of their tribal identity, their religious integrity, their financial security, their sense of having a safe place to call home...

And some of them, especially the inner circle of Jesus' closest followers, were learning what it was like to be hated and excluded because of their choice to follow a wandering teacher and prophet who refused to play by other people's rules.

As we picture those people, gathered expectantly around Jesus, perhaps we can picture ourselves and our contemporaries among them.

And perhaps we can hear with fresh ears Jesus' challenge to people who wrongly equated God's favour with full pockets, full stomachs, false joviality and their peers' superficial approval;

Perhaps we can see with fresh eyes what the kingdom of God that Jesus talked so much about might mean.

Perhaps we can free our understanding of blessing from other-worldly wishful thinking, or from this-worldly habitual niceness,

² e.g. William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*, p. 76 ff.

And start relating it to living in this world, as though the God of Jesus were in charge.

Then maybe the next time that we hear somebody say "bless you"

We won't simply write it off as a meaningless interjection,

But will instead give some thought to asking ourselves when, with whom, and how.

When, with whom and how can we be a blessing to others?

When, with whom and how can we practise the "golden rule?"

When, with whom, and how can we follow Jesus' example, and challenge the assumption that God favours the healthy, the wealthy, the powerful.

When, with whom, and how can we embody the life and teaching of Jesus in our world?

Answering these questions isn't something I can do for you or even for myself in the space of a sermon;

Answering these questions is a learning experience that should occupy the whole of our lives.

This time a week ago I was occupied with reflecting on the life of someone very dear to me, after my father died on the morning of Waitangi Day.

My Dad was a teacher and a lifelong follower of Jesus, so it seemed appropriate to have today's text, the summary of Jesus' teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, as a reading at his funeral.

Thinking about Jesus' words as I was preparing the service for my father, I couldn't help being reminded of something I often hear myself saying when people come to see me as a counsellor.

When I ask people what they want to be different, they often say they just want to be happy,

And I reply that whilst I certainly won't be trying to make them miserable, making or keeping people happy is not something that I or any counsellor for that matter can guarantee.

In fact, I tell them that experiencing occasional unhappiness is unavoidable – if we don't feel sad when someone we love dies or is suffering, we are robots, not human beings.

So I tell them – and remind myself – that it is possible, and sometimes necessary, to do things that matter even when we're feeling desperately unhappy.

And that, in a nutshell, was my experience last Monday, when alongside the great sadness I felt whilst conducting my father's funeral, I was also aware of the great blessing of having shared in his life.

I was reminded of a poem by one of my Dad's favourite writers, Joy Cowley,

And I'd like to close by sharing with you her take on our Gospel text for today.

'God prepares us for this blessing in ways we would rather avoid.

Whatever empties us,

whatever hollows us,

Whatever strips us down to basic existence,

Whatever unwraps us,

whatever sweeps away the idols of our own importance

These things create a space for the truth of who we really are, and we stand in the light of new awareness.

When we know who we truly are,

Made by God to be filled by God

Then the pain of loss becomes a dream,

Meekness comes back to us as strength

And poverty of spirit inherits riches far beyond naming.

They call it paradox, my friends, and we need to live it to understand.

It is our smallness that is made into the greatness of God.³

³ 'The Giving of God', from *Come and See* by Joy Cowley. Pleroma Christian Supplies 2008.

Prayer for others and ourselves

We all want to be happy, God, and yet we know that happiness is so often fleeting;
 We feel challenged by the thought that blessing is not the same thing as happiness,
 And by Jesus' teaching that blessings need to be given as well as received...
 We think now of the people whom we can bless with our prayerful presence;
 We think of what Jesus said about God's concern for the helpless, the hopeless, the poor.
 We think of how readily our world still confuses blessing with winning, and cursing with losing;
 We think of politicians and public figures, sportspeople and students, men, women and children who feel driven to win at all costs.
 Whilst we're grateful for those whose drive, energy, and commitment to excellence inspire others,
 We want to follow Jesus' example of celebrating your presence with others just as they are.
 And so we pray for the grace to give and receive your blessing;
 We pray for eyes and ears and hearts that are open to seeing your spirit at work in our world.
 We reflect quietly on what the words of Jesus that we heard this morning mean to us at the moment.
 We think of our own need, our own hunger, our own sorrows, our own experiences of exclusion;
 We think of people who share those experiences with us;
 We pray for all who bring the blessings of compassion, hope and healing into places of sorrow, despair and pain.

We think of how far so much of our world is from practicing the golden rule of Jesus,
 Of how much time, effort and money are spent building walls, making weapons, hurting and excluding rather than healing and including others
 And we pray simply in the spirit of Jesus' teaching that this will change.
 In the name of the Christ who blessed us with this teaching and whose subversive spirit still inspires us we pray, AMEN.