

Thought for the Week No 2 - Sunday 29th March 2020

In the Old Testament book of Numbers (which, I suspect is probably not one of the first bible books to which we would think of turning) in chapter 6 and verses 22-26 we find words which, I am sure, will be familiar to you:

*The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

We usually call it the "Aaronic Blessing" and is it traditionally sung or said at services of baptism, ordination etc. Aaron was Moses' brother and he and his family were the priests to the nation of Israel. God instructed the priests to bless the people with these words. It was to be recited or sung before the people with hands raised high as a reminder that the blessing came from God above and not from the high priest.

We often use the word "blessing" very lightly or in a superficial way. Christians sometimes use it as a way of saying goodbye or signing off a letter or email with "every blessing" or "many blessings." But the blessing that God gave to Aaron is far more than a superficial greeting, and I believe these words are particularly relevant to us in the particular circumstance in which we find ourselves as the coronavirus pandemic spreads throughout the land and daily we hear of increased numbers of deaths from Covid-19.

The word which our Bibles translate as "blessing" is used mainly as a sign of God's favour. When blessing his people Israel, God promises prosperity and health, fertility, success in work and trade, victory in battle and much more. In Deuteronomy, Moses says "*The Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.*" That is not wishful thinking: it is a promise to Israel, albeit a conditional one. It is dependent on their faithfulness, as the context of Numbers 6 clearly indicates. And it is backed up by God's power and his covenant of faithful love. When God blesses, things change for the better. What is remarkable, though, is the original meaning of the word - "on bended knee". It refers to the position, in which a person kneels before another on one knee. Think of the good old days when a man went down on his knee to propose to a woman or ask for her hand!

If you are a fan of the film trilogy, "The Lord of the Rings" based on the books by JRR Tolkien, you may know that in the final part, "The Return of the King", there is a scene where Aragorn is crowned king of men. When he meets the four hobbits, what does he do? Does he demand them to show loyalty and submission to him by bowing down? No, he himself, the newly crowned king, kneels down before them as his sign of loyalty to them. It is actually quite a touching scene in the movie.

And that is exactly what God's blessing of his people expresses: God himself kneeling down before his people; God offering to come to us his people "on bended knee"—that is, to come to serve us, to love us, to share himself with us. God comes down to meet us on the level where we are. And that is exactly what he did at the Incarnation. In the person of Jesus, his Son he came to die on the cross to save us from our sins. And he also came to us at Pentecost in the person of the Holy Spirit. Such is the love of God that he comes to us and bends down to

bless us because we are unable to reach up to him. It has been suggested that in the light of the new covenant the Aaronic Blessing could be read with the Trinity in mind:

God the Father bless you and keep you,

God the Son make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you

God the Spirit lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Isn't that what we really need today? We need to Lord to bless and "keep" us during these uncertain days. "Keep" conveys the idea of protection and is related to the biblical picture of the shepherd protecting his flock. We must be careful, however, not to interpret this to mean that God will prevent us from ever being harmed. We live in a fallen world and God's people are subject to its illness and diseases such as the coronavirus just like everyone else. However, the difference for Christian believers is that we have God's eternal protection. Whatever this world may throw at us, the God who saves us from our sins will protect us eternally.

The second part of the Aaronic Blessing speaks of God's face shining upon us. We enjoy the warmth of the sun on the odd occasion when can actually it see past the clouds. It can make us feel happier and healthier, but not if we stay indoors. We cannot experience God's blessings unless we are in his presence. John writes in the first chapter of his Gospel:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another."

The prodigal son in Jesus' parable was in a far land feeding pigs in order to survive. He was out of range of his father to receive help. Only when he returned to his father's home could his father bless him, organize a big welcome party, and provide the care and protection that his son needed. The father's face shone with joy when the son came home. In the same way God's face turns into a big smile when we turn to him in repentance and faith in order to receive forgiveness for our sins and reconciliation through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what the Bible calls "seeking God's face." Have you done that, or are you still living in the land of shadows? The Aaronic Blessing promises that if we do turn to God, he will be gracious to us. The idea of grace is that we do not receive what we deserve, but rather receive what we don't deserve.

And the third part of the Aaronic blessing promises that God will turn his face to us and give us peace - real true peace. With the threat of the coronavirus pandemic hanging over us, we may find it hard to experience peace, but whatever happens, we can be sure that we are God's own.

God our loving heavenly Father will bless us, letting us share in his abundant riches, and protecting us.

In Christ the Son he speaks to us, lets his face shine on us, and bestows his grace on us, as we turn to him in repentance.

Through God the Spirit he turns his face toward us in acceptance, making us whole— for that is what peace, or "shalom," really means.

And in all that, he reminds us with the words of Isaiah 43:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."

John Murdock