

Sunday 22nd December 2024; Advent 4. Benefice Holy Communion, Oswaldkirk

Last week I spoke of joy that comes from God as a gift. This week we reflect on another of God's gifts to us - blessing. We hear the word in our services at least once every week at the end of the service as the person presiding or leading offers a blessing to send everyone on their way.

The word "bless" or "blessing" comes from the Old English word *bledsian*, based on the Old English word for blood. It may have originally meant "to consecrate with blood" and it was later used to translate the Latin word *benedicere*, which means "to praise, worship." The word "bless" is also used to translate the Hebrew word *barak*, which means "to praise, congratulate or salute." In the common vernacular, the word is used to indicate a wish of good fortune upon the one receiving the blessing.

In our Gospel today we hear how Elizabeth as she rejoiced at seeing Mary, felt her unborn son, John jump with joy, pronounced, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*". Then, everything was okay again in Mary's world, because she found someone who not only accepted her, and opened her home to her, but more importantly, who *blessed* her. Elizabeth blessed Mary and that was all that Mary really needed, all that she was seeking. Whether she knew it at the time or not, she just needed to be blessed, to be accepted, loved, and blessed by another. That is something we all need.

So what does it mean to be blessed? The Bible begins with a blessing. In Genesis 1, the very first thing that God did, after creating Adam and Eve, was to bless them. You might even say that God created them *in order* to bless them, and you might say the same for us. We were created by God to

be blessed by God. God didn't create us to put us through some kind of test, or to judge us when we make mistakes, or to sit back and watch us when we struggle through life. God created us to bless us, to love us, to be in a relationship with us; one that is built on love and filled with grace and mercy. There is nothing that God wants more than simply to bless us. We were born to be blessed, all of us, here and everyone else out there. We who acknowledge that blessing must go out and bless too; not curse, not criticize, not bully, not condemn, or judge, but bless.

Somewhere along the way, the brokenness of this world caused us to forget we are blessed by God. You might even say that this is at the root of all the problems in this world. We see that with Adam and Eve, they forget how blessed they truly were. They focus, instead, on the one thing they *don't* have, they forget how blessed they truly are, and they sin. Ever since then, we, too, have shared in their sin. We, too, have focused on what we don't have and forgotten how blessed we truly are and we, too, sin. It has become human nature.

But because God is love, He doesn't give up on us. He had a plan, a way to bless the world all over again and that plan has a name, and his name is Jesus. At Christmas we give thanks that Jesus our Saviour was born into this broken world to show us God's desire to bless us, and Jesus spent his life in ministry doing just that. He blessed those who had been forgotten and rejected: the poor, the hungry, those who were weeping, the hated, the cursed, the broken. He blessed them all. He came to bless us, died to bless us, and rose again from the dead to bring us the greatest blessing of all - eternal life in the presence of God the Father. Even his very last act, before ascending into heaven, was to offer a blessing and remind us we are beloved by God. Nothing we do will ever change that; we

are God's beloved even when this world tries to make us forget it.

But it can't end there, because there are too many people in this world who still don't believe this, who struggle to love themselves, much less to believe that they are loved by God, and the only way this will happen - the only way it *can* happen - is for us to do something about it. We are blessed to be a blessing and we are called to be a blessing. We are loved to love, and we are called to love. That is our purpose, the purpose of all who believe that they are God's beloved: to return that love - to God, to ourselves, and to our world, all of it, not just the bits we think are worthy. Because this world, is just like young Mary, it appears on our doorstep, appears to us in human encounter, in dire circumstances and situations. Alone, scared, confused, desperate for nothing more than for someone to simply open the door and offer a blessing. Just as Elizabeth did for Mary, we are called to do as she did to open our door, our arms, and our hearts, and offer a blessing and let God do the rest and in so doing, we too like Elizabeth will feel God's spirit jump for joy inside us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.