

Are you the kind of person who, when someone sneezes, says ‘bless you’? If so, why do you think you do it? Is it politeness, just the way you were brought up? Is it to show concern for the person you are blessing – worry that they might be ill, or is it a way of acknowledging the generally loud noise they have just made, and in some way excusing them for it? And in this period of pandemic, is it a way of saying “I know you might have covid so I am going to say bless you in the hope you keep your germs to yourself and the words in some way protect me as well?”

Many cultures in the world have similar rituals connected with sneezing, so the origins of saying “bless you” are at best obscure, but one explanation is given as follows: Pope Gregory the Great also lived through a time of plague, in his case the bubonic plague in the 6th century. He was so concerned about the effects of the illness he ordered prayers to be said in the streets, and so the phrase “God bless you” became a desperate invocation of God’s blessing and a plea for protection against the disease.

When I was ordained I was given a book of blessings and curses. I am delighted to be able to say I have used the blessings far more than the other option! Sometimes in the Church Times there are pictures of bishops in the basket of a cherry picker, up high in the sky to bless a new clock tower or some other equally unlikely object, as it is said that much of a bishop’s ministry is blessing things.

Blessing is also part of a priest’s ministry. When I was first ordained priest I got very hung up on the 3 things that a priest can do that a deacon can’t: pronounce the Absolution, give the final Blessing and say the Prayer of Consecration. All of these things weighed heavily on me; as a flawed and fallible human being I felt a great responsibility when asked to say these words.

Until a wise person pointed out it wasn’t actually me who forgave sins, it wasn’t me who actually blessed people, nor was it me who actually made the elements of the Eucharist holy.

I was reminded that while you and I can say “bless you” to people in a variety of settings, both in church and outside of it, we always have to rely upon and remember that it is God who actually blesses. However, we do need to remember the link between the prayer of blessing and the expected outcomes:

a blessing is not so much a prayer of aspiration, intercession and hope as a pronouncement of expectation. That’s because blessings are not wishful thinking, not even our hopes expressed in prayer, but are the touch of God on our lives.

And in some ways our prayers are exactly the same – because in prayer as in blessing we walk the tightrope of faith. As with Gregory the Great and prayers against the plague this talk of prayer and blessing could all collapse into superstition and magic, an attempt to manipulate God and the world, but it can also put us in touch with God’s constant work of loving and restoring.

On one hand, in wishing to avoid prayer-as-magic we can easily stop expecting anything of God at all.

On the other hand God is not to be enlisted in the service of what we want, we are to discover through prayer what God wants of us and what our prayers should be.

In our Gospel Jesus takes us to the heart of what blessing is all about. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God”. In Luke’s account Jesus has been up the mountain all night in prayer, and when He returns He chooses His 12 disciples and gives this teaching about the nature and values of the coming Kingdom. Some people see an echo here of Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai.

But even more central for Luke, and reminding us about what I said earlier about our need to pray, the night Jesus spends in prayer is the way He discerns God's will for the choice of the Apostles, and Jesus is also empowered for His teaching and healing ministry. So, having named the future leadership of God's new community of faith Jesus then describes the way this new community will behave so differently, and reverse so many expectation, from and of the rest of the world. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God... woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation".

What a topsy-turvy world! Happy poor, unhappy rich – that isn't the wisdom of this world, nor is it what the people had been led to expect in the Wisdom literature to which this kind of saying belongs. Wasn't wealth a sign of God's blessing? But in the mouth of Jesus, as He proclaims the coming Kingdom, the beatitudes of Jesus have more connection with the writings of the prophets. They describe a reversal which is coming, and encourage the people to long for it and pray for it, and to begin to live as if this new world is already present.

In this prophetic sense, to bless (or to pronounce as blessed-by-God) is to invoke the promised Kingdom with all its values and reversals. It is not an act of magic, but an act of faith. It looks at a worldly reality and sees an eternal reality. It is only in prayer that we can learn to see in this prophetic way, and to gain the discernment and power, as Jesus did, to treat people around us and the world itself in the light of the reality which is coming, not only that which is passing away.

Prayer like this can lead to a greater acceptance and use of the ministry of blessing. Blessing invokes God's future on the person who is blessed.

Blessing, first expressed by God on the birds of the air and the fish of the sea in the creation narrative in Genesis, extends God's creative love over His handiwork.

Blessing, such as Jesus spoke over the cup of wine at the Last Supper, express the outworking of His sacrifice made for us all. So blessing is not just a vague expression of goodwill, a verbal pat on the back. Blessing is an activity of God which we experience in this created world.

Blessing relates us to all that God the Holy Trinity is and is doing, in healing and reconciling, but it also expresses affirmation and celebration of God in our world too. In Jewish family prayers there is a great emphasis on a father's prayer of blessing for his son, and a mother's prayer of blessing for her daughter. These prayers are not just empty words, but active expressions of the parents' desire for good to happen to and for their children. When we see how so many families are fractured and in pain perhaps these prayers should become part of our Christian practice too. The affirmation and celebration inherent in prayers of blessing are always a way for healing and reconciliation to begin.

Our alternative Collect for today says:
Eternal God,
whose Son went among the crowds
and brought healing with his touch:
help us to show his love,
in your Church as we gather together,
and by our lives as they are transformed
into the image of Christ our Lord.

We will surely find this easier to do if we spend our time in prayer and in blessing those around us. Amen