

The Forgotten Art of Blessing

Most of us have probably heard the following old Irish blessing at least a hundred times:

"May the road rise up to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And the rains fall soft upon your fields.
And, until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand."

While it is a very simple blessing, the Irish words are a powerful reminder of how important a blessing can be in our lives. Unfortunately, in our culture today, we have become a nation of cursers, not one who blesses. Our movies, our music, our magazines are crammed with four-letter words.

Drive down any highway and you will see people cursing each other with flying fingers and flailing fists. Visit any playground and you will not only hear cursing from the mouths of babes, but also witness the violent behaviour that cursing calls forth. The act of cursing has become so prevalent in our society that we seem to be a people that has forgotten how to BLESS.

In the Bible, throughout the creation story, God sets an example by blessing all that he creates: "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it good" (Genesis 1:31). This goodness, and the desire for goodness, is the heart of what blessing is all about.

A blessing as defined by Webster's is, "The utterance of a wish, request or direction that good should follow, pronounced over a person or an object, or the benefit which follows such utterances."

Cursing, on the other hand, is the opposite of blessing.

To curse is to call evil or injury down on someone. It is to invoke or pray for evil.

And so in life, we find ourselves offered the choice: to bless or to curse, to call forth goodness or to call down evil.

As Christians, we need to understand the implications that accompany this

choice. If we are to be a people of God, we need to relearn the Forgotten Art of Blessing.

To offer a blessing is not a difficult task.

In fact, a blessing can be so simple that all too often we take the act of blessing for granted. The priest, for example, blesses us at the end of each Mass (provided we have not run away early). Whether we are aware of it or not, we bless ourselves each time we make the Sign of the Cross. Despite this inherent simplicity, the act of blessing can take on more meaning if we come to understand the three basic elements that comprise a blessing, such as our Irish blessing.

The Elements of a Blessing:

The first element in any blessing is that there has to be a relationship with God. When we bless, when we ask for goodness, we ask from the source of all goodness, we ask God.

When things are going well in our lives - when the road seems to rise and meet us - our relationship with God will be positive. Cursing is the furthest thing from our minds.

When things are not going so well in our lives - when the road does not rise to meet us - everything in life can seem like an uphill struggle.

It is during these times that we run the risk of losing our relationship with God. If we allow this to happen, we are unable to bless. We become like the embittered psalmist who can only curse. Relationship with and belief in God are essential to blessing.

The second element in a blessing is the ritual of transfer of the blessing or the goodness.

Historically, this transfer of the blessing takes place physically through words that we pronounce and gestures that we make, such as uplifted arm or actual laying-on of hand upon a person. The person giving the blessing transfers the blessing in such a manner that it will somehow be experienced by the receiver.

The sense of touch, whether it is the wind at your back, the sun shining upon your face or the firm hand of a priest/elder blessing your forehead, can convey an enormous life-sustaining power.

A blessing is the bridge between heaven and earth. The transfer of the divine that occurs when we bless is truly a sacred moment.

The third element of a blessing is the enhancement of the receiver, wherein we envision the goodness of the blessing.

Even Jesus, when he pronounced the Beatitudes, envisioned a goodness that would give comfort and hope to millennia of believers. We have in our possession the ability to envision virtually any future for humanity.

The power to bless is incredibly awesome. It is the vision of divine enhancement, of a people resting in the palm of God's hand, that is the hallmark of a blessing.

Opportunities for Blessings:

Our days are filled with endless opportunities to practice the art of blessing. The best place to start, however, is by personally calling down God's goodness by blessing ourselves with the Sign of the Cross. Morning after morning, we can begin our day by choosing that divine vision, not only for ourselves, but also for all who we might encounter in the course of a day.

We might also choose to use this opportunity to include a morning prayer. This self-blessing through gesture, touch and words can become an important ritual that will help us to spiritually centre our day.

Our mealtimes provide yet another important opportunity for blessing. We know from our New Testament readings that Jesus would traditionally bless food at the feeding of the multitudes and at the Last Supper.

In our society of abundance, we take our food supply for granted, indulging and overindulging, even to the point of impairing our health. Why not take a moment at each meal to pause and bless the nourishment before us? Mealtime graces from The Anglican Prayer Book include:

Before meals:

Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

After meals:

We give thee thanks, Almighty God, for all thy gifts, who lives and reigns, for ever and ever. Amen

Our homes, the core place where we spend our lives, should also be blessed.

Our vicar is always willing to visit and bless our homes.

In Christian homes a Cross or Crucifix can be seen prominently displayed as a sign of God's benevolent presence in the home.

Similarly, in Jewish homes the mezuzah is placed on the doorpost. Part of the Jewish tradition is the touching of the mezuzah and the reciting of the wonderful blessing:

"May God protect my going out and coming in, now and forever."

We all need that reminder, whether we are just sitting around the house or venturing out into the world, that the goodness of God is with us.

Perhaps the most important of the blessings that we can bestow in life would be the regular blessing of our children. (My children are exposed to this tradition).

Who can forget the Old Testament account of Jacob stealing his brother Esau's blessing and the richness of their father Isaac's vision for Jacob:

"May God give to you of the dew of the heavens and of the fertility of the earth abundance of grain and wine" (Genesis 27:28).

Today, we give our children everything that is material and little that is spiritual, then we are surprised when a child does something amoral.

Like Isaac's vision for Esau, we find ourselves in a position where the only blessing that we can muster comes out sounding more like a curse:

"Ah, far from the fertile earth shall be your dwelling; far from the dew of the heavens above!" (Genesis 27:39).

It is crucial that our children taste and see the goodness of the Lord. Simple daily gestures - a hand on their head and the signing of the Cross on their forehead followed by a "God be with you," is all that it takes. Never to let a day

slip by where we do not, in some small way, call forth the vision of goodness into the lives of our children.

The Importance of Blessings:

Blessings, whether they are Irish or Jewish, ancient or modern, are an important part of our faith life.

We need to forget cursing. More than ever, we need to continue to bring the flow of the divine into our lives. Just as in Moses' time, our generation needs to learn the art of blessing:

“The Lord said to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons and tell them: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: The Lord bless thee and keep thee! The Lord make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious to thee! The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee peace!” (Numbers 6:22-26).

Like Aaron and his sons, we too hold that awesome power to bless. But do we?

We just need to use it and make a habit of it like our parents and the generations before them did. As I wrote this piece I could not but remember those days when we, as children were blessed each day. God Bless them and keep them in His glory.

God Bless.

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