

Blessed

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Luke 6:20-31

Many may remember from the dim and distant past of their Sunday School Blessings the song, 'Count your blessings'. I'll spare you my singing of it but the chorus goes:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.*

I suspect we live most of our lives in an unexamined way. We're so busy and caught up in the moment of just getting on with it that we don't look long enough and hard enough at the blessings that have come to us, or what the Lord has done. I rather suspect we think most of the blessings that have come into our lives are through our own action and work, and not, as they often are, sheer gift from God.

Who or what are the blessings in your life this morning? Are the blessings clear as day to you, now that you look? Is it perfectly obvious to you that it is this person, or that relationship, or that job, or the home where you live, or your garden, or the holiday you enjoyed, or some other sunny moment in time which changed your life forever and which always comes to mind when blessings are talked about?

Maybe you have to dig a little deeper. Maybe life is overcast for you. A sadness that you can't quite shake off. A sense of guilt that won't leave you. A missed opportunity. A run of bad luck. But you know that somewhere, in amidst the frustration, or grief, or pain, there is a blessing in disguise, just waiting to be uncovered, so that you can move onwards and upwards.

I rather like Jerome K Jerome's comment, "What I am looking for is a blessing *not* in disguise." We like our blessings up front and in the open, and coming along often enough to make life sweet and smooth and worth the living.

The blessings, sometimes known by their Latin name the *beatitudes* have two different outings in the New Testament. Matthew's gospel has Jesus on top of a mountain delivering the Beatitudes; Luke has Him coming down from the mountain where He has been praying, to stand on a level place. Which is it to be, the elevated Jesus, or the Jesus among us?ⁱ

For Luke, the mountain is a place of prayer, and there He chooses the Twelve (Disciples). Now He moves to the plain below to be with the people, with whom Jesus identifies, as at His baptism.ⁱⁱ

Unlike Matthew's version, which has nine blessings, and no woes. Luke has four of each, set in parallels: poor-rich, hungry-full, weeping-laughing, rejected-accepted. There is, unsurprisingly since they're delivered from the level place amongst the people, a directness about Luke's blessings and woes. Jesus declares that the poor, the hungry, the lamenting, the hated, excluded and defamed are to rejoice for their suffering will be reversed and turned into plenty and joy. By contrast the rich, the privileged, the prominent and the comfortable will not find themselves automatically in God's kingdom.

Jesus turns things upside down, time and again. What so many people value in life will seem not to have much lasting worth; the order of things will be reversed. When God looks at the lives of God's children, God will take into consideration the circumstances over which we have great or little control, and how we respond to these, and how we treat others in those circumstances. Maybe that's the key to this hard piece of Bible. Is it the case that Jesus is asking us to reflect on whether we are a blessing or a woe, in the way we live, in the way we treat others?

We are in the Christian season of 'All Saints' – where we are asked to reflect on the characteristics of the blessed, the 'saints', alongside the characteristics of the lost, over whom the cry of 'woe' rings out. It is a time when we remember and celebrate the blessed of the church's story, and our own lives, who have been the real, everyday saints, as well as the extraordinary individuals, who have transformed life for us, and for the world.

But the life of holiness to which we should aspire is challenging and difficult. So much of the good news message of Jesus is about attending to the inspiration our relationship with God, particularly through what Jesus teaches, and setting it into the context of how we treat others, and how we treat ourselves. I think this passage has such impact because it is not Jesus preaching from on high, it is Jesus looking at us on our level, or even Jesus looking up at us because He has knelt down to touch someone sick or lame or share hope with someone who is poor or excluded. We can't see past them because Jesus is blocking our view, and directing us to look at how we, sometimes full of blessing, sometimes full of woe, react to the Kingdom of God which is all around us now.

If we hope to be citizens of the Kingdom of God and be amongst the holy ones who will inherit it, as in the Daniel reading, we need to behave like citizens of God, and live up to the DNA of goodness, kindness, generosity, understanding, tolerance, hopefulness, and love that is part of the make-up of humanity. We might feel like unexpected saints, unworthy of the blessing, but that is who we are, and what God hopes to see in us, even though we might struggle to see it or be it at times.

In the Apostle's Creed, which we say in our Communion service, one of the affirmations we give is, "I believe in...the communion of saints." We regard saints, the blessed, as worthy of particular note as examples and guides in Christian discipleship. In the New Testament it was acceptable to

refer to all the members of a Christian congregation as saints, even when someone of them were not always consistently saintly. "The saintliness or holiness of these people lay not in their virtues, but in their sharing in the holiness of God, and that is always a fair way to think of the good qualities allegedly possessed by any of us."ⁱⁱⁱ

I am often struck in our church building how many saints there are in the stained-glass windows. Peter and Paul; Elizabeth and Mary; Margaret and Columba; Benedict and Francis, (how prophetic to have to Popes in Morningside before they were even Popes!). Matthew, Mark, Luke and John up behind me in the Burne Jones window. But what I wonder would our church be like if we did not have these stained-glass windows in place, but mirrors, where you and I might peek, somewhat sheepishly, and see our own saintliness peeking back at us.

The communion of saints, the blessed, the holy ones, is now restricted to the great and the good from the dim and distant past. God's saints', God's blessed and holy ones, walk amongst us, are seated beside us, today.

Perhaps there will be that rare and wonderful person who makes a radical change and leaves a high-powered corporate job to teach reading in the inner city. For most of us the changes are more subtle. We should cherish the memory of those who have gone before us in faith. We know that some of the everyday saints struggled as we do with the reality of blessing and woe in life. Other more renowned saints lived the gospel in spectacular ways.^{iv} But the truth of the matter is we need your ordinary, common or garden saints, who decide to become elders, or sing in the choir, or serve on a coffee rota, or drive people to church, or notice the person sitting on their own and talks to them, or visits someone in hospital, or picks up the phone to ask how someone is, or gives money to a charity, or encourages a child, or is simply just nice and smiles at the world, even in the hardest of times.

Holy living, saintly living, lives of blessing is often grounded in the real suffering and struggle of real people. That's the reality, and that's the hope, for all of us unlikely, unexpected saints of God. It's being a blessing in the darkness of woe.

I came across this quote from the American author, Maya Angelou, with which I finish:

“The thing to do, it seems to me, is to prepare yourself so you can be a rainbow in somebody else's cloud. Somebody who may not look like you. May not call God the same name you call God - if they call God at all. I may not dance your dances or speak your language. But be a blessing to somebody. That's what I think.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Thomas Edward Frank, Feasting on the Gospel, Luke Vol 1, p158

ⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, Luke, p86

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilleasbuig Macmillan, A Workable Belief, pps 63-64

^{iv} Laura S Sugg, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4, p240