

Thought for Tuesday 28th July 20 with Kate Horrix

Time was during a heavy pollen season, I could happily and discreetly sneeze three or four times into a handkerchief. Strangers would smile and sympathetically mouth, ' Bless you'. Nowadays the mere suggestion of a sneeze into the elbow is followed by rapid scattering and suspicious scowls. The sub-text being 'Are you passing on the dreaded virus?' Historically that is when people should be saying 'Bless you'. The custom goes back to 6th century. Bubonic plague was spreading across Europe. Pope Gregory instructed his priests to pass on God's blessing to anyone who showed symptoms; the first of which was sneezing. Down the ages, all sorts of superstitions became attached to this simple phrase. People variously believed that your soul could rush out of your body during a sneezing fit and be seized by the devil. Others believed that evil spirits could burst in. So in both cases it was important to counteract evil by invoking God's blessing. It's become absorbed into our social habits. Today we're just as likely to hear the word on its own Ah Bless! For most people it has nothing much to do with God or the devil. It's more a sentimental response to cute pictures of pets, babies and romantic couples . It's something non-committal to say when people have scrolled through a seemingly endless gallery of photo opportunities. Ah Bless ...we don't think much about what we're actually saying.

Some weeks back I was taken by my Bible reading notes, rather unwillingly I must admit, into the book of Numbers. There in chapter 6, I discovered a blessing that I'd heard countless times before but didn't realise originated in the Old Testament.

'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.'

This known as the priestly blessing. It was given by God to Moses to pass on to Aaron and his sons who served as priests. They in turn would pass on the blessing to the people of Israel. Practising Jews still use the prayer daily as they pray for their children. We often hear it at the end of worship.

Blessings are the good things in life. In difficult times we are encouraged to count them, 'to name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.' The words, 'the Lord bless you and keep you,' are a reminder of our ongoing relationship with God, God who acknowledges our worth, who values us and longs to give us the good things in life, both material and spiritual. They remind us too of God who will keep us and protect us; not from the virus or from losing our job, our savings, or our relationships. But he will guard us from slipping into despair, from losing our very selves, our souls, when terrible events overtake us.

'He makes his face to shine on us', like the sun giving us warmth; the other day with a chill breeze it was a joy to see the sun breaking through the clouds and feel its warmth on my face. My mood improved no end. It's like the smile when you see someone we've been out of contact with for a while. A smile of recognition, of relief, of love. So this smile of God is gracious, undeserved from our perspective, accepting us as we are faults and all. ' God's face is directed towards us and the brilliance of his holiness washes over us filling us with his peace.' Word translated as peace has a wealth of meaning in Hebrew. Shalom carries with it peace of mind, freedom from anxiety, wholeness and well being. If you sneeze in Germany, people will say 'Gesundheit'. Their word for health. So we're back to sneezing and the priestly blessing.

In the letter of Peter, he describes Jesus' followers as 'priests of the king, holy and pure, you are God's very own – all this so that you may show to others how God called you out of darkness into his own wonderful light. Once you were less than nothing; now you are God's own. Once you knew very little of God's kindness; now your very lives have been changed by it' (1 Peter 2: 9-10 Living Bible).

While we are not called to pronounce the whole priestly blessing on everyone who comes to the door, we are called to pass on the blessing we have received to others. Showing that everyone is valued, each person is someone of worth. Giving them more than the time of day, showing genuine interest in their concerns. Being gracious to them forgiving their faults and foibles, caring for all aspects of their well-being. Above all looking at them face to face and smiling, passing on God's light and peace. The beauty of a blessing is that it is a gift of grace. Nothing is expected in return. Blessings begin as words, mouthed , whispered or prayed. May God give us the opportunity to share his blessing with others today.

Listen now to John Rutter's beautiful setting of the words of blessing.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=RDPaLBndhrall&v=PaLBndhrall&feature=emb_rel_end