

Sister Wendy Becket once said:

The happier we are, the more grateful we are. And the more grateful we are, the happier we are. I think gratitude is instinctive. Not just in a Christian – in human beings. A very prominent atheist said to me one day: ‘if only there were someone to say thank-you to.’ And I think that’s how we’re made. But with that gratitude must go happiness, because happiness is a consequence of gratitude – they’re part of each other.

Justin Welby once explained:

I’m slightly cautious about the word ‘happiness’. I prefer ‘joy’. It’s very interesting that the Pope’s called his publication *The Joy of the Gospel* not ‘*The Happiness of the Gospel*’. So I go for joy, as being slightly more complex and deeper than happiness.

Today’s reading from Ephesians is one long sentence with the theme of celebration and joy found in God’s blessing: blessing after blessing, after blessing, after blessing, and more blessing !

The Greek word translated "blessed" used by Jesus (in the Sermon on the Mount) is *makarios*, and it's meaning is a little more nuanced than what we get from *happy*. The idea behind *makarios* is that something is made "large" or "lengthy." When God "blesses" us, God "extends" His benefits to us. He "enlarges" His mercy to us. God

"lengthens" His charity in our direction. (Forget the long arm of the law — this is the long arm of God's love and grace!)

And it is as if the writer of Ephesians wants us to know this unending charity of God- the lengthy unending sentence mirrors the amount of unending blessings we receive from God.

We hear a few of these blessings:

Blessings are found from

before the beginning of time, creation of the world

throughout time, especially evidenced in God’s covenant with his people, and through Jesus Christ and the community of believers

and into eternity.

The word used in Ephesians to describe blessing is not the same word as happy but the exact word found time and time again in the unfolding story of God’s people throughout history- The word for blessing is an expression of amazement at the goodness of God:

(If it was Craig Revell-Halwood from ‘Strictly’ watching the dance of God throughout history, he would exclaim AM-AZ- ING!)

When Abraham's servant found Isaac a wife- the same word of blessing God is used -Amazing

When Jethro was told of Israel's deliverance from Egypt the same word of blessing God is used. The promise of a land of blessing that showed the abundant love of God. The same word for blessing is used -Amazing

When prayers are answered words of blessing God are used- just one example in Psalm 66.

To the leader. A Song. A Psalm.

¹ Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;

**² sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise.**

**³ Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!
Because of your great power, your enemies cringe
before you.**

**⁴ All the earth worships you;
they sing praises to you,
sing praises to your name." *Selah***

⁵ Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

⁶ He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.

There we rejoiced in him,

⁷ who rules by his might forever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—
let the rebellious not exalt themselves. *Selah*

⁸ Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,

⁹ who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.

¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.

¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;

¹² you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;

yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. ^[a]

¹³ I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
I will pay you my vows,

¹⁴ those that my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.

¹⁵ I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats. *Selah*

¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for me.

¹⁷ I cried aloud to him,
and he was extolled with my tongue.

¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.

¹⁹ But truly God has listened;
he has given heed to the words of my prayer.

²⁰ ***Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.***

Blessing is not ethereal it is based in historical reality.

All these blessings are real in the lives of people, people of the New Testament too- One fine example being

Mary who sings the Magnificat-

Mary moves from the response of fear, when the angel first appears to an acknowledgement 'Let it be according to your word'

to singing a song of praise, 'My Soul Magnifies the Lord'

A timid voice of 'ok then'

to a song that bubbles out full of joy

And what is it that moves her from one to the other?

She sees God's blessing, in her cousin Elizabeth. She moves from an experience of being alone to being in the company of one she loves and one who blesses her with words and action . Mary stays with Elizabeth, Elizabeth is hospitable for someone who needs to know that her experience is understood. Elizabeth understands her experience on a personal level.

AND

Elizabeth says to Mary-

'Blessed is she who has believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord'

This leads me to my second point about the purpose of our reading today:

Letters to the early churches, even from Paul in prison , extol the early believers to BLESS God, not just on their own but in community with others and to be a blessing to each other, in times of difficulty and hope.

Some scholars believe that the beginning of Ephesians was read or sung communally at BAPTISMS. The sentence was not a sentence but a baptismal hymn in which the whole community is reminded of who they are

- a. Chosen by God
- b. Adopted by God
- c. Freely blessed by God's love and called beloved
- d. Forgiven
- e. Lavished in the love of God
- f. Given the ability to know God's will
- g. An inheritor of the promises of God
- h. Given wisdom
- i. Given hope
- j. Given the Holy Spirit

I like to think of it as a communal lullaby in which God's arms reach around all of us and where God sings over us- as described by the prophet Zephaniah.

God sings

I love you

I have called you by name

You are mine

My love for you will bless you in life

And you will know this love through my Holy Spirit

My joy will be with you

And you will know my power to conquer the shadows of sin

You will be guided into truth

And inherit eternal life

And I would call this lullaby song, *the song of adoption*, Prophesying into the life of the newly baptised and the congregation – *this is the gift you are to me, my children, know my love, as my children, through the gift of the Spirit deep in your hearts* .

(And you know when you hear a beautiful song it can stop you in your tracks and raise your heart heavenward, that is what I like to imagine this passage like. Gardner in the

1980s speaks of humanities innate ability to feel reverence and awe and to give thanks and praise. She says that literature has the capacity to provoke an awe-filled response to the world. She suggests that the writers of Ephesians want to provoke this sense of awe.)

How do we know this adoption and blessing by God is true?

Because Christ lived it first and showed it. In Jewish thought the king represents the people, what happens to the king happens to the people, what is true of the king is true of the people- the things that Jesus knew, can be known to us. (The phrase **In Christ** phrase is used ten times in the first part of Ephesians alone.) We all can be strengthened and encouraged because Christ has already done it.

We too have been given communal hymns that praise and bless God- and that help us know God's blessings through Christ- one example is the hymn we sang today- Praise my soul the king of heaven to his feet thy tribute bring, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.....

Each week we sing In the Gloria -Glory to God in the highest... We praise thee, we bless thee, we glorify thee and then we relate the acts of God

(or in the BCP prayer book, at the end of the service knowing communion with God we say..Glory to God for his blessings)

the Benedictus, before communion, we sing BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD

And the prayer of communion, is known as THE GREAT THANKSGIVING . A reminder to us week by week of the story of who we are, reciting great acts of God and how we have been blessed in God's love in Christ for each one of us- ransomed, healed restored forgiven in Christ.

What is the end result of all this blessing- the end result is the question -How can we be a community of blessing?

Some churches have points of Testimony each week in which members of the church share how God has blessed them.

I will never forget one such Black Pentecostal Assemblies of God Church that I attended in Birmingham, in which people were invited to come to the front of church to give testimony to the blessings of God.

She said- I was walking down the street when my handbag was stolen, I hope the contents were a blessing to the ones who stole it.

When I visited Pam Goodman in hospital to give her communion and the last rights, she took my hand and kissed it. Even in death she gave blessing, and we know from her life amongst us here that even though her life was tough, serving her husband through years of illness, she always had words of blessing for others. Her life was a testimony to the blessings of God.

The reality of these blessings is not just events that happened in the past but realities with continue to unfold in the present and the future. (STROUP: 1981)

Let us pause to think 'What blessings are tangible in your lives?'

What is it like when a congregation lives into its God-given vocation as a "community for blessing." And therefore a community of JOY- A community that lifts up their hearts to God?

Churches exist to bless the neighbour, near or far -- a potentially powerful counter-testimony against the widespread belief that religious folk are mainly interested in judging and cursing other people, not blessing them.

Could we be a community that knows the profound joy of participating in an effort to restore hope in Salisbury;

Can we be a community that enables people alone and fearful to belong with others,

Can we be people that is so rooted in knowing God's love that we can welcome ALL people joyfully?

A community that in a memorial service marked by sorrow shares the deep conviction that death does not finally have the last word.

YES, YES, YES, YES, YES

blessing, blessing, blessing, blessing, blessing

To the glory of God.

AMEN.

Practical ideas for blessing

- a. Know and learn again and again the joy of being a child of God**
- b. Sing a favourite hymn or worship song of praise to God, read Psalm 66**
- c. Choose to speak and focus on joy, not ignoring the pain but knowing God is with you in it, just as Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world**
- d. Be open to God's promptings of who to walk alongside in their time of loneliness or trouble and tell them they are loved in word and action**
- e. Pray blessing into other people's lives**

Sources used:

York Courses PRAISE HIM

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