

NUMBERS 6.24-26: A PRIESTLY BLESSING

[Chelmsford 26 July 2009: dedication of Naomi Elizabeth Mayhew]

Having children is a hazardous business.

Frankly, none of us would have children, if we were to take out a proper risk assessment before our children came into being.

- Queen Victoria in a letter to the Crown Princess of Prussia wrote: *“You will find as the children grow up that as a rule children are a bitter disappointment – their greatest object being to do precisely what their parents do not wish and have anxiously tried to prevent”*
- Oscar Wilde observed: *“Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them; rarely, if ever, do they forgive them”*
- Or in the old maxim, *‘Children begin as headaches and end up as heartaches’*.

Goodness, I hope I am not depressing you

Many of us can speak positively about the joys of family life.

Certainly Caroline & I can testify to how rewarding children can be – not least as they grow up and begin to care for their parents!

But, if we are honest, it is a risky business having children.

All the more reason, therefore, to come to church and ask God’s help in the task of parenthood.

But we don’t just ask God’s help with our children.

We ask God’s blessing on our children.

Ministers pronounce the so-called the ‘Aaronic blessing’: **“May the Lord bless you and take care of you; may the Lord be kind and gracious to you; may the Lord look on you with favour and give you peace”**.

Or in the more traditional words of the NRSV: **“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”**.

We call this the ‘Aaronic’ blessing because, and I quote from the verse immediately preceding the blessing, **“The Lord commanded Moses to tell Aaron and his sons to use the following words in blessing the people of Israel”** (6.22). And immediately after the blessing, we read: **“And the Lord said, ‘If they pronounce my name as a blessing upon the people of Israel, I will bless them”** (6.27).

This is a priestly blessing – a blessing originally to be pronounced by the priests of Israel upon the people of Israel.

Christian ministers have taken over this blessing and used it not just to bless God’s people at the end of the service as a closing benediction – but also to bless individuals on special occasions in their life

- At an ordination service this blessing is pronounced upon the newly ordained minister. Indeed, at Martin’s ordination we said this blessing together as a prayer for Martin.
- At a wedding service this blessing is pronounced upon the newly married couple, and only then is the groom allowed to kiss his bride.
- And at a dedication service this blessing is pronounced upon a child

In the original Hebrew it's a relatively short blessing – just 15 words. However, our English translations tend to almost double the number of words. At first sight it may appear to be a somewhat repetitive blessing – each of the three lines of the blessing appears to say the same thing. And yet, as we shall see, each line has a different nuance; each line develops the idea of blessing.

1. MAY THE LORD BLESS YOU AND TAKE CARE OF YOU

Literally: “*The Lord bless you and keep you*” (NRSV)

What are we wanting God to do when we say ‘**May the Lord bless you**’?
What went through your mind when I said to Naomi ‘**May the Lord bless you**’?
Were we asking God just to bless her today?
No it was more than that – we were asking God to bless Naomi in all the years that lie ahead – between now and death, Lord, bless this child.

But what in particular did you have in mind?
Were we asking God to bless Naomi with good health?
Were we asking God to bless Naomi with a good education?
Were we asking God to bless Naomi with a good job, with a happy marriage?

Clearly we can't be too prescriptive with God
God alone knows what is best for Naomi
But nonetheless, all of us want God's very best for Naomi
And there is nothing wrong with that: ‘*Naomi, may the Lord bless you!*’

But we don't simply ask God to bless her – we also ask God to ‘**take care**’ of her, or in the words of the NRSV, to ‘**keep her**’.

Sadly we live in a fallen world – a world in which there are many dangers.
There are people who would prey upon young children – Lord, take care of her
There are abusive partners – Lord take care of her
Lord, from all the dangers of life, take care of her
Is that what we are asking God?

Significantly, the rabbis interpreted this line as: ‘*May the Lord bless Israel with good possessions, yet also keep her from becoming a slave to them*’

Naomi, may the Lord bless you with good things – but don't become bound by these good things

- *Naomi, we want you to make the most of all the educational advantages that come your way, but don't become obsessed by getting degree after degree after degree*
- *Naomi, we want you to have a good job, but don't become obsessed by your job – there is more to life than being a workaholic*
- *Naomi, we want you to have enough of this world's goods, but don't become obsessed with things – ‘Man doesn't live by bread alone’*
- *Naomi, we want you to have a happy marriage, but don't become obsessed with family – there is a wider world out there*

Naomi, **may the Lord take care of you**

That is our prayer – for Naomi, and for all the children in our care

But the clear teaching of Scripture is that ***God does not bless without our co-operation***. For God to bless our children, then we need to ensure that we play our part too. As we recognised in Naomi's dedication, parents have a key role in bringing up their children. Parents need to teach their children how God wants them to live – indeed, parents need to set their children an example of how God wants us to live. God will find it difficult to realise our hopes and dreams for Naomi, if we exclude him from the family. And the day will come when Naomi herself will need to play her part, if she is to know God's blessing upon her life.

My mind goes to three chapters found toward the end of the Book of Deuteronomy. There in chapters 28-30 Moses offers the people of Israel a choice “**between good and evil; between life and death... between God's blessing and God's curse**” (30.15,19). He says: “**If you obey the Lord your God and faithfully keep all his commands that I am giving you today, he will make you greater than any other nation. Obey the Lord your God and all these blessings will be yours**” – whereupon Moses lists a host of ways in which God could bless his people (Deut 28,1-14) “**But**”, he goes on, “**if you disobey the Lord your God and do not faithfully keep all his commands and laws that I am giving you today, all these evil things will happen to you**”; and whereupon he lists a host of ways in which God will curse his people (Deut 28.15-68).

Israel had a choice – a choice between a blessing and a curse. It all depended upon them: “**Choose life**”, Moses urges his people. “**Love the Lord your God, obey him and be faithful to him**” – then God will bless them (Deut 30.19,20)

The fact is that bringing a child for blessing does not guarantee a happy life. Just as by having a church wedding, and seeking God's blessing upon the marriage, does not guarantee that the marriage will not break down. We too have to co-operate with God. If we turn our back upon our Maker's instructions for life, then we should not be surprised if things go wrong in life.

2. MAY THE LORD BE KIND AND GRACIOUS TO YOU

Literally: “***The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you***” (NRSV)

A “*shining face*” is a sign of pleasure. May the Lord ‘*beam on you with pleasure*’; or as Peterson in *The Message* translates: “***May the Lord smile upon you***”.

The underlying idea here is that if God is pleased with us, then he will want to be kind and gracious to us. ‘*Lord, be kind to Naomi – be gracious to her. Just look at her. She is a beautiful child, she is a good child, she is a bundle of innocence – so please do be kind to her*’.

I have no doubt that God will be kind to her. God isn't a maverick who cannot be relied upon

He doesn't have personality problems – he is not a Jekyll and Hyde character – one day reasonable, and one day unreasonable.

God is kindness itself

By contrast, we alas do have personality problems – in the sense that we can often be unreasonable – we can often be anything but kindness itself.

There is tendency within each one of us to live for self, and not for God

Sin has not only spoiled the life of our world – it has spoiled each one of our lives.

As a result, God has every reason to turn his face away from us – he has every reason not to bless. For in one way or another, we have all gone our stupid, selfish way.

In the words of Isaiah 53: “**All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way**” (53.6)

But the good news is that God still wants to bless

For in Jesus God has shown us extraordinary kindness.

In the words of Paul found in Eph 2: “**God’s mercy is so abundant, and his love for us is so great, that while we were spiritually dead in our disobedience he brought us to life with Christ. It is by God’s grace you have been saved**” (2.4-5).

Or to go back to Isaiah 53: Yes, we were wandering away from God, but “**the Lord has made the punishment fall on him, the punishment all of us deserved**” (Is 53.6)

God wants to bless – he has been amazingly kind; he has been amazingly gracious.

But *if we are to experience his blessing to the full, then we must respond to his kindness and his grace.* We must accept the gift of salvation which God offers us in Jesus. Only so can we experience his forgiveness for the mess we have made of our lives.

Only so can we discover purpose, meaning, and hope in life.

As we have said earlier on, if we would know God’s blessing, then we need to choose life. And what is true of us in general, is also true of Naomi.

‘Naomi, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you – Naomi, our prayer is that as you grow older you will discover the kindness and grace of God, and that in due course you will respond to God’s love, and know his kindness and grace for yourself’.

3. **MAY THE LORD LOOK ON YOU WITH FAVOUR AND GIVE YOU PEACE**

Literally: “*The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace*” (NRSV). Again, there is a degree of repetition: for in Hebrew the word translated “*countenance*” is the same word as “*face*”.

NIV: “*May the Lord turn his face towards you*”; REB: “*May the Lord look kindly on you*”. Or as the GNB has it: “**May the Lord look on you with favour**”

The word favour reminds me of the days when I was learning the piano. To help me read the music, I learnt the mnemonic: “*Every good boy deserves favour*”.

Oh God, **favour** this child – bless her. And in particular, give her “**peace**”

Yes, “**peace**” is the climax of this blessing.
But why ‘peace’ we may ask. What is so special about peace?

Peace in the English language means an absence of war, an absence of strife.
So are we saying: Lord, spare this child the horrors of war?
Are we saying: Lord, spare this child the unhappiness of domestic strife?
Lord, when she eventually goes to work, spare this child tension in the office?
It seems a strange blessing to ask

But the Hebrew word for **peace** is a much richer and more inclusive word.
In the words of one Jewish scholar this peace is “*the peace which alone reconciles and strengthens, which calms us and clears our vision, which frees us from restlessness and from the bondage of unsatisfied desire, which gives us the consciousness of attainment, the consciousness of permanence even amid the transitoriness of ourselves and of outward things*” (Montefiore)

Or to put it more simply: this *peace is simply God’s very best*.
In asking God to give Naomi peace, we are asking God to bless her with inner security, with inner harmony – that she might be a fulfilled, truly happy person.
Eugene Peterson: “**God look on you full in the face and make you prosper**” – prosper not in the sense of outward prosperity, but inward well-being.

Where is such peace to be found?
It is to be found in God – in God who has made himself known to us in Jesus.
The night before Jesus died he told his disciples that peace was his legacy to them.
“**Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you**” (Jn 14.27).
He went on: “**Have peace by being united to me**” (16.33).
And when he returned to that Upper Room on the day of his resurrection he greeted his disciples twice with the words “**Peace be with you**” (20.19,21).

“**May the Lord look on you with favour and give you peace**”

Here is a blessing for special occasions – for ordinations, dedications and weddings.
Here too is a blessing for our church. At one of our recent leadership team meetings we read this blessing as a blessing for the church: “*May the Lord bless our church and take of our church; may the Lord be kind and gracious to our church; may the Lord look on our church with favour and give us peace*”
Here is a blessing for each one of us: “**May the Lord bless you and take care of you; may the Lord be kind and gracious to you; may the Lord look on you with favour and give you peace**”.

Listen to the Rutter version of this blessing