

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Advent 4

19th December 2021

“Being a Blessing to Others”

Readings: Micah 5: 2-5a; Song of Mary Hebrews 10: 5-10 Luke 1: 39-45.

God's Blessed Ones

A popular grace used before dinner at university colleges, schools and other institutions goes:

“Benedictus, Benedicat, per Jesum Christum Dominum Nostrum. Amen”

which roughly means:

“May the blessed one bless, through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen.”

The words are a little bit ambiguous. Do they pronounce a blessing on the diners, the food, or both? It is unclear, nevertheless, the prayer is a recognition that God is one who blesses, and that blessing is part of the nature of God.

There are two Greek words translated as ‘blessed’. The first ‘μακαριος’ (Makarios) is applied to people, and means ‘happy or fortunate’. It is the word used by Elizabeth in her greeting to Mary (Luke 1: 42) and is also used by Mary’s in her response *The Song of Mary* (or Magnificat). This same word is also used in the series of blessings in Luke 6 as part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

(Luke 6: 20-21)

The second ancient Greek word for blessing is ‘ευλογειν’ (eulogein), which is more often applied to God and means ‘to speak well of someone’ or to hold someone in ‘high regard’, such as we do in a eulogy – from which the word is derived.

In both of these senses, the Gospel of Luke presents blessing as something to do with God, either as an attribute of God or something that God does for humanity. Interestingly, the word ‘blessed’ appears almost fifty times in the New Testament and is found more often in the Gospel of Luke than in any other document.

God's Chosen Ones

As God's people, we are called to be blessed, and to know that blessing in our lives - if we care to seek it. Moreover, our journey through life is one of discovering blessings day by day, through the recognition of God's activity and creative purposes in both our lives and in the lives of those around us.

This raises another aspect of the story of Mary found in the opening chapters of the Gospel. Clearly, Mary and Elizabeth were called by God, and both played their part in God's saving activity in the world. From the visits of the angels, through to the births of John and Jesus, and on to the prophecies of Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna, these two women cooperated with God as the chosen means of God's saving activity in the world.

From the early church onwards Mary was recognised as one who was especially called by God to be part of the process of salvation history. In this respect, she has been held up as an icon of obedience and grace. "*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus...*" as the *Ave Maria* prayer goes. In time, Mary came to be known as the 'God Bearer' in Eastern Christianity, and as 'Mother of God' in Latin Christianity.

Mary is therefore meant to be an example of one who is called to serve God. This is not something remote from us, but rather a recognition that all people are called to service. As Mary and Elizabeth were called, so we are also called. The fruit of Mary's life changed the world, and we are likewise called to live fruitful lives by cooperating with God. Mary's Song, the Magnificat, is an invitation to join God in the business of transforming the world. As she sang,

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

(Luke 1: 51-53)

These things are the features of God's saving activity, and we are called to be the means of their achievement in our own times.

To be sure, this is what it is to be one of God's chosen people. It is a radical call to action; and is a world away from the caricature of the smug Christian who, with an air of superiority, considers themselves chosen because they 'do' or 'believe' the right things yet will never act to 'lift up the lowly or fill the hungry with good things'.

If we are not being a blessing to others and if we are not changing the world for goodness sake then we are probably not serving God. Indeed, if we are not a means of blessing we may well be a curse to others.

God's Saved Ones

The Magnificat begins with the words:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...

(Luke 1: 46-47)

The word 'saviour' (σωτηρι) appears three times in Luke's birth narrative – here and in the angel's address to the shepherds outside Bethlehem. As with the title 'son of God', this word 'saviour' is a politically charged one that was connected with the Roman Emperor Augustus, who had claimed the title 'Saviour of the World' as part of the imperial cult.

Moreover, in the Hebrew scriptures, the term 'saviour' either referred to a king or military leader who could restore Israel's political fortunes. More often, however, it referred to God as the liberator and protector of the nation. The word 'saviour' therefore had strong political overtones.

The story of the birth of Jesus, as presented by Luke, has a political edge to it - especially in the Song of Mary. Her words have a revolutionary mood to them suggesting the immanent transformation of the world and the restoration of God's people. The idea of Jesus as a saviour and of God's salvation were developed further in the New Testament, but what does the idea of salvation come to mean?

In the Hebrew Scriptures salvation comes when God acts to release the people from slavery or subjection (as in the Exodus from Egypt or the return from exile in Babylon), or when the people are protected from their enemies such as the Philistines and Moabites etc. In this respect salvation is about deliverance and restoration - it is salvation from something through the use of political power.

In the New Testament salvation changes its emphasis to become salvation for something and becomes more a spiritual matter rather than a political one. This change in approach is based on the recognition of what God had already done for humanity in Christ. In this way salvation became a matter of proclaiming something that had both already happened and also continues to happen in our own time.

But for what have we been saved? The Gospel calls us to live lives that are both saved now, but also saved more fully in the future. Salvation is therefore a process by which life is filled with meaning, purpose, peace, and justice. In other words, we are saved through a blessing in the person of Jesus, so that we may be blessed in ourselves by God's Holy Spirit, and then go out to be a blessing to others.

Benedicto benedicatur, per Jesum Christum, Dominum nostrum. Amen

Let praise be given to the Blessed One, though Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.