

The Lord bless you and keep you
Numbers 6:22-27, Luke 2:15-21

1 January 2017

In 1967 when the original STAR TREK TV series appeared one of the characters, Mr Spock used a salute to accompany his signature greeting: 'Live long and prosper!' This was a sign made with an uplifted arm, thumb stretched out and the rest of the fingers were parted two by two. It was devised by the Jewish actor, Leonard Nimoy, who played Mr Spock and he later acknowledged that he based it on the Priestly or Aaronic blessing we heard in our OT reading. He first saw it as a child in a synagogue. There it was performed as a two handed gesture, where the two thumbs were touching and thus the two hands showed the Hebrew letter 'Shin', standing for 'Shaddai', one of the names used in the Bible for the God of Israel. This way as the Priest lifted his hands he 'put the name of the Lord on the people' and the Lord blessed them, just as we read it from the passage in Numbers. This made such an impression on the young Nimoy that years later he used it himself in Star Trek.

Then in 1979 the words of this same blessing were found in an archaeological dig in the Hinnon Valley in Jerusalem. They were written on small silver scrolls and placed in two amulets at a burial site. It turned out to be the oldest known Biblical text that has ever been found dating back to the 7th century BCE, which makes it four centuries older than the Qumran texts. Clearly, it is a very ancient blessing, which stood the test of times and it is still widely used both in Judaism and in Christianity. And how appropriate that it is given to us for this very first Sunday in 2017! We begin the year with God's blessing. So, may I wish you all a very happy New Year with the words received, used and handed down to us by our ancestors in the faith:

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.

So what do we know about the origin of this blessing? As we said it comes in the book known by the uninspiring name 'Numbers'. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is called 'In the Wilderness'. It describes the events of the forty years spent by the liberated Israeli slaves in the desert between Egypt and Canaan. The blessing is given at the foot of Mount Sinai, as the Israeli tribes, having received the Ten Commandments, are preparing to set out on their wanderings towards the Promised Land. So this Blessing is a blessing for a journey, a blessing for the road stretching out before them; an unknown territory with unexpected dangers, worries, anxieties,

but also delights and surprising joys, just like the year 2017 that's stretching out before us.

As we reflect on the blessing itself and try to discover what it means to live under divine benediction, we can see that even the composition itself has symbolic meanings. In the original Hebrew the blessing consists of 12 words (not counting the name of God), which signifies the 12 tribes of Israel. This is a made-to-measure blessing, it is people-specific. This is how Israel experienced God, who not only chose them, but knew them inside-out. God's words, blessings, teachings, warnings were all addressed to them in that intimate knowledge. This is how Jesus experienced God, hence his favourite way of addressing God as Father; A good Father, who knows his children and cares for them to the 'n'th degree. And this is how we can trust in God when we set foot in 2017. God knows us and our circumstances intimately. When God blesses us the blessing is for us, whatever our particular circumstances, whoever we are, wherever we come from, whatever part of our road we are treading.

And although I've just said 'not counting the name of God', but, the name of God is there in every line of the blessing, in fact, they all start with the name of God. It is God who is the active agent in all this. The words of the blessing are given to Aaron and his sons, who, will constitute the priestly order in Israel, but there is no mistaking who is the One, who blesses; the blessing concludes with the very 'personal' word from God, 'they shall put my name on the Israelites and *I shall bless them*'. So, in a way, the designation of 'Priestly blessing' is rather unfortunate. It gives the impression that it is the Priest who blesses the people. And sure enough the conservative understanding of both Judaism and Christianity tended to make it an exclusive right of priests to pronounce any blessing, but particularly this one. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the reason was the upholding and guarding of priestly power over the people. In Protestantism this has been modified by the greater emphasis placed on the 'priesthood of all believers', which enables and encourages people to bring God's blessing to each other both in words and in deeds. Similarly in Liberal Judaism the blessing is either not used in the liturgy or when it's used it's not done by the worship leader, but as a communal reading by the whole congregation.

And just one more observation about the form of the blessing: In Hebrew each line of the blessing gets progressively longer (3, 5 and 7 words). Each line is longer than the previous one, which creates the impression of 'a stream of blessing' – says one commentator – 'it begins as a trickle but flows ever more strongly'. According to ancient beliefs, blessing, even God's blessing, was a limited commodity. If that blessing fell on one nation, the others were left out of it. If the blessing fell on one son, the other was excluded from the inheritance. We remember the OT story of Jacob and Esau. This blessing talks about a different

God, whose overflowing generosity and faithfulness is not getting less and less, it's not getting 'used up', rather it's getting greater and greater in the 'using of it'. As the writer of our next hymn puts it, 'morning by morning new mercies I see'. I can't think of a better way to start a new year than trusting in God's 'stream of blessing', which is offered in an ever stronger flow and with an expectation that there are new blessings to be had every day that opens up before us.

The content of this blessing is well-known to most of us. It is among the best-known passages of the Bible. In our tradition it is often used in the Baptismal liturgy, when we say it or sing it. What we don't realise is, that in one sense it is quite a counter-cultural blessing in that part of the Bible which it comes from. This is the time of the Covenant between Israel and God. And one understanding of the Covenant is 'if ' you do such and such, God will bless you in this way or that. There are always some conditions attached to the Divine benevolence. But in this blessing, there are no 'ifs' and 'buts'. It is unconditional. It is not a different Covenant, but a more down-to-earth, sober estimate of it based on honest human experience. Here God's unconditional blessing is understood as God's ongoing faithfulness to the covenant contrasting with Israel's repeated failure to be faithful to that same Covenant. Seeing these opposing ways of understanding God side-by-side may be of particular interest to those of us who may be tempted to judge the OT in a one-dimensional way.

If we want to look at the details of the blessing some knowledge of Biblical Hebrew would come useful, which, I am afraid I don't possess. But consulting those who do, may enrich our understanding. Apparently, the Hebrew word used for 'bless' literally means 'to kneel', so blessing is to be understood as bringing gifts on bended knees. Just imagine God, almighty Creator of the Universe bending the knee and serving his people with overflowing generosity! Or imagine yourself blessing someone in this posture of humble service. The literal meaning of 'keep' is to 'guard' or protect and it is related to the word 'thorn'. It suggests the action of a shepherd out at night on the hillside protecting his flock within a pen created by intertwining thorny bushes. But it also means tending and caring for and paying careful attention to the flock as well as protecting them. It is a very engaging occupation; it takes up the whole life of the shepherd. This blessing confirms to us that we are in good hands, we are God's business, who watches over us day and night. What a marvellous promise to be given on the threshold of a New Year!

In 'The Lord makes his face to shine upon you', the face stands for the wholeness of the divine presence. It is God's wish to graciously grant this presence to the people, accompanying them on their journey, yet they often think of God as hiding it from them. We may know the feeling ourselves, and if so, perhaps it says more about our state of mind than God's real absence. But the good news is that the brightness of God's 'face' the blessing talks about, is not just some neutral source of

light, rather it is the kind, which brings order out of chaos, shows up the right way amongst all the cul-de sacs of your life, the kind that makes 'things fall into place'. And finally, 'the Lord lifts up his countenance upon you' conveys God's joyous and benevolent attitude towards the people. It refers to a smiling, radiant face bright with contentment and acceptance. 'Countenance' has a similar meaning to 'face', and when applied to God it encompasses God's whole being and the giving of peace, or 'shalom' promises to set in place all that the people need to be whole and complete.

We can be grateful to our ancestors for preserving the words of this blessing, which put the name of God on the people, they were to be known by the kind of God revealed in the blessing. We as Christians believe in the same God, the God we recognise most clearly in Jesus who, in turn, put his name on us, a name meaning 'God saves'.

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