

Sermon, 22nd August, 2010

'Bless the Lord', based on Psalm 103

Me: Bless the Lord O my soul!

You: **and forget not all His benefits.**

So let us look at rest of the Psalm. The writer blesses the Lord for all his benefits and then goes onto list the best part of a fair few. 'He [God] forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities' and a little later: 'He satisfies you with good things' renews your youth and sticks up for the oppressed'. We're going to look briefly at each one in turn. 'He [God] forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities' and a little later: 'He satisfies you with good things' renews your youth and sticks up for the oppressed'.

Lets look at forgiving sins first. In the so called Lord's Prayer - which is actually the disciples prayer 'cos He gave it to us - we say forgive us our sins as we forgive those, or them, that sin against us. So, what is sin? In Hebrew, there is a rhetorical device of repeated couplets: the same thing is said twice, they repeat themselves, (do you see what I did there?). Sometimes identical words are used; sometimes different words with the same meaning. In Romans 3 Paul writes 'all have sinned' and goes on 'and fall short of the glory of God'. I understand this to be a definition of sin. Like the archer not getting enough power in the bow to get the arrow to the target, we fall short. Notice: it is us that fall. We have to take responsibility. I would argue that we can't blame our genes, our upbringing or our circumstances. Sure, they have a bearing on, or even severely limit our options, but we still get to choose. We have freewill. We all fall short even of our own standards. We do, say and think things we ought not to and leave undone those things that we ought to have done. Pleasure, money, sex or power are not necessarily sin; but they are when they are miss-used or miss-applied: that is not enjoyed within the will of God. Quite literally, the good news is that when we were still far off God met us in His son and brought us home. This is like being a child outside the head's office waiting for a ticking off. Wow, the head-pupil comes along and comforts us, what is more, they say we can go out to the playground because they are going to take the rap for us. Jesus our great high priest and lamb of God has made a way where there was no way. If we ask Him to forgive us he will be faithful to forgive. Sometimes it is hard for us to accept we can be given a fresh start. Yet, with God everything is possible. Sometimes it is hard to forgive others. Don't suffer the root of bitterness to get a hold in you. Be encouraged by the stories of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the like. Even victims of sexual abuse can with God's help strive to live in the sweet freedom of forgiveness.

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Such forgiveness is healing - restoring us to God or a loved one. However, the Psalmist gives us healing on the list of benefits of the Lord. You may hear it said that in those days people felt that good things came from God so that is why healing is given as a benefit from the Lord - healing is good God is good so gets the credit. Yet we read in today's Gospel, Jesus was not allowed to heal on the Lord's day because healing was counted work. Opprobrium notwithstanding, the subversive radical leader of our movement, worked illegally. I am not sure if there is any special significance to the '18 years' detail save that it's a long time. The healed was a woman coming to the synagogue where exclusively circumcised healthy men met to pray. That was risky: she should have been at home doing the ironing! What is more she had a health condition, to her contemporaries she was disgusting and suffering for her or her parents' wrongdoings. Notice also, she was 'with a spirit'. In Mediaeval England, she'd probably have been done to death, just as some children are tortured in some wackier churches here today, Still Jesus, our healer healed her. Whether her wrongdoing was involved, whether the demon was involved, whether society said it could not happen. Jesus healed her. You may hear it said that the story is just a spiritual allegory. I don't believe the early Church treated it so, nor should we. You may hear it said that healing died with the last of the apostles. Well we are sent ones, so in that sense we too are apostles and I've not died yet! There is even a precedent here at Holy Cross. We have a sculpture in the north ambulatory attesting to Thomas from Bristol way getting his sight back here in 1315. Today, there is prayer for healing offered in the Friends Chapel during communion.

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So not only can we be set free from worry about letting God or ourselves down, but we can persist in hope for healing medically, miraculously, or even if it comes through death. Next, the Psalmist thanks God for satisfaction with good things. Let us also expect and seek blessing for ourselves and for others. Recently, I was moved in listening to a friend preaching. They said all the usual God loves you stuff; which is right but can be so familiar that it becomes a bit of a yawn unless the spirit grabs one with it; but then they said: 'He even likes you!' Remember that if nothing else: 'He even likes you!' Renewing of youth is a good one too. Eagles shed their bashed old beaks, so the fable goes, and grow sparkly new ones. It's a bit like dying hair or getting fresh teeth I suppose. Still, for the Psalmist it's an illustration of a profound truth. We can be born again, we are in Christ new creations. As with actual creation things were made with an appearance of age so proponents say 'trees bearing seed' not 'seed for trees'. So in the same way, we can have the good we missed from the lost, broken and hurt bits of our lives back.

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And now we have come full circle to where we started. 'The Lord executes judgement for the oppressed' writes the Psalmist. Yes He does, but remember Isaiah in our Hebrew scripture reading. He exhorted his hearers and us at the beginning: 'offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted'. This is among the many joys of the Christian faith. God doesn't go it alone. He walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the garden, became incarnate of the Holy Ghost and the unmarried Mary, He sends us to all the world to preach the Gospel. So as we humbly approach the body and blood of Christ in the sacraments, let us draw people to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

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