



## Count your blessings

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When you respond to someone's sneeze with an instinctive 'bless you', do you ever think about what you're saying? Sr Teresa White reflects on the essentially social dynamic of a blessing and the way in which John the Baptist, the feast of whose Passion we observe on 29 August, was a communicator of blessing in his life.

Blessing, in my childhood, was considered to be the preserve of priests. That this was so is confirmed, in my memory, by visits to our family by the young curate of our parish. Sometimes, when he came, my father was at work, so any conversation that took place was with my mother – we children were greeted courteously, but our verbal participation was neither expected nor encouraged. The visits always ended with my mother saying, 'Please, Father, give us your blessing', and we all knelt down, bowed our heads and made the sign of the cross. There was something endearing in the way my mother scooped up Paul, the youngest, into her arms, and put her hand on his head to quieten him so that he too, minuscule as he was, could fittingly receive the blessing. For us it was a holy action, associated with God and goodness.

I was unaccountably reminded of this a few days ago when, in a crowded London bus, a child sneezed. It was a relatively discreet sneeze but it was clearly audible in the silence of a longish halt at traffic lights. The mother's reaction was immediate: she proffered a tissue, and said 'Bless you, darling!' I noticed that at least two other women looked at the child and quietly echoed the mother's words – I could hear the hiss of their esses! Perhaps yet others, like me, did so silently. The little girl herself smiled as if in acknowledgement.



So even in our secularised culture, it seems, 'blessing' is common currency. Yet its origin is unequivocally religious, and some form of the practice of blessing is found not only in Judaism and Christianity but in Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism also. In all these faiths its godliness, its divine connection, is undeniable: to bless is to sanctify, to make holy; to bless is to invite God to intervene in our lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it well: 'A blessing' he

says, 'is the visible, perceptible, effective proximity of God'. In view of my experience on the bus, I found it interesting that he continues: 'A blessing demands to be passed on – it communicates itself to other people. To be blessed is to be oneself a blessing'. The child on the bus seemed to sense this as she responded instinctively with her smile, passing on the blessing.

The etymology of 'to bless', in old English, relates it to the word 'blood' and in early times it meant to sprinkle persons or things with the sacrificial blood of animals offered to a divinity. As time passed, water was used, not blood, and the sprinkling came to be seen as a sign of that purification needed by those wishing to enter into God's presence. To this day, in Judaism and Christianity, sprinkling with water takes place in numerous ritual observances. Psalm 51, used by both traditions, expresses its cleansing purpose: 'Sprinkle me with water until I am clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow' (Ps 51:7).

But the action of sprinkling, which was and still is believed by many people of faith to have a sacred significance, does not exhaust the meaning of ‘blessing’, and our understanding of the word is enriched and deepened if we ponder the Latin equivalent, *benedicere*. This compound verb literally means to speak (*dicere*) well (*bene*), to speak favourably, approvingly, positively of someone. Applied to God, it is often translated as ‘to give praise’, and the praise is coupled with thanksgiving. And from time immemorial we bless certain places and objects: homes and churches, precious books and works of art, food and drink, crops and herds, plants and animals. When we bless these things, we look on them with reverence, we honour them, admire their beauty, appreciate their usefulness, ‘speak well’ of them, and give thanks to God for them.

In his 2014 book, *Sacred Fire*, Ronald Rolheiser devotes a full chapter to blessing. Without attempting to elaborate the notion of blessing in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, he briefly notes what he sees to be two essential passages: the early verses of Genesis, where we are told that God looked upon creation and ‘saw that it was good’, and the Gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus by John. He seeks above all to present the spiritual and psychological benefits of blessing and of being blessed, by God and by one another. His special insight is that blessing is a way out of the depression which afflicts so many adults today, and he believes it can and often does lead to wholeness and contentment, not just for the person blessed, but equally for the one who blesses: ‘when we bless others, we help lift depression from our lives; when we do not bless others, we deepen that depression’ (p. 235). He admits that blessings need not be articulated in words, because ‘there are ways beyond

words to tell others that we take delight in them, just as there are many ways to communicate to others that we find them a threat or irritation in our lives’ (p. 227). Nevertheless, he holds that words are usually an important part of a true and heartfelt blessing.

Following the theories of anthropologists, Rolheiser says that blessing has three essential components: looking upon someone with affection and attentiveness, really ‘seeing’ the person and taking delight in what we see; speaking words of affirmation, of approval; and being ready to give up something of ourselves so that the other person may flourish. As I read this, and appreciated its wisdom, I thought of John the Baptist. Details from the four gospels present a picture of John that fulfils Rolheiser’s short list of requirements for ‘blessing’. In the Gospel of John, we are told how John the Baptist ‘stared hard’ at Jesus, looked upon him, recognised him as the ‘Lamb of God’, and later said of Jesus the famous words: ‘he must increase, but I must decrease’. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the words heard coming from heaven when Jesus was baptised by John: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you’.

Rolheiser sees blessing as the ‘crowning glory’ of a prayerful life, a life in which we all participate when we truly see, speak to and give of ourselves to others, and when others do the same for us – something to remember and celebrate the next time we hear, or utter, a simple ‘bless you’.

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