

Bless

Little Boy kneels at the foot of the bed,
 Droops on the little hands little gold head.
 Hush! Hush! Whisper who dares!
 Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.

God bless Mummy. I know that's right.
 Wasn't it fun in the bath tonight?
 The cold's so cold, and the hot's so hot.
 Oh! God bless Daddy - I quite forgot.

If I open my fingers a little bit more,
 I can see Nanny's dressing gown on the door.
 It's a beautiful blue, but it hasn't a hood.
 Oh! God bless Nanny and make her good.

There are some words that we use over and over again in church, and yet maybe don't really think about what they mean. It seems to me that 'bless' is one of those, so I want to try and explore what it means for a few minutes. We do use it a lot in ordinary conversation as well as in Christian contexts. We have the hang-over from primitive superstitions of devils coming out when we sneeze, and people saying 'Bless you' – to fill the vacant space with good instead of bad. People will say all sorts of things are 'a blessing' – whether it is a new kitchen gadget, or more solemnly when someone who has been suffering finally dies. People with no thought of God will still say 'You have to count your blessings'. It even gets used as a kind of alternative to 'Aah' – a child does something cute, and someone says 'Ah, bless!'.

The words like Bless and blessing are very common in the Old Testament (640 instances), and fairly common in the New (68 instances). What is clear from both Old and New Testament is that the source of blessing is God. We have that enshrined in Bishop Ken's words in the hymn 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow' – though if we dig into the origins of words that could almost be rephrased as 'Bless God from whom all blessing flow'. We will return to that idea of a cycle of blessing in a while. Many of the Psalms which in the Prayer Book version begin 'Praise God' – like Psalm 103 and 104 which begin 'Praise the Lord O my soul in more recent translations read 'Bless the Lord O my soul'.

But what does the word really mean? Curiously we have the Greek word still in use in today's English. If you go to a funeral, people may well give a 'Eulogy'. And that is the word in question. At a funeral it usually means saying good things about the person who has died. And a blessing – a eulogising – means the bestowal of good or happiness on someone, as one scholar defined it. You are probably aware that the so-called Beatitudes which traditional have begun 'Blessed are ' are

often translated in Bibles today as 'Happy are.' We will be singing one of those Beatitudes later – 'Blest are the pure in heart'.

But there also seems to me to be something dynamic about being blessed or blessing. It is about making a difference. That goes right back to one of the earliest examples of God blessing people, when God says to Abram (as he then was) 'I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.' It goes on 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' I mentioned the cycle of blessing earlier. Here it is again – and I will return to it at the end of what I say today.

Of course there are formal blessings. We read of at least three blessings Jesus gave – in Mark 10 after he told the disciples off for pushing children away from him, it says he took the children in his arms and blessed them – and the word seems to mean enfolding them in his arms. It is formal, but it is highly personal. Then in Matthew 10 we read of the way Jesus commissions his disciples, and they are to be bearers of blessing. And when he ascends to heaven after the resurrection in Luke 24 it says 'he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them'. That reflects the custom which we find in the Old Testament of people blessing others when they leave. Perhaps that is a reason why we still have a formal blessing at the end of this service despite some people saying there is no need after receiving Communion for any further blessing. A formal blessing in words is how worship ended in the Temple. We are familiar with the words of blessing given for Aaron and his sons to use: '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 the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace'. We still use those words in exactly that form. Formal blessings happen at great moments – at a baptism, at a wedding, at an ordination, at a funeral.

In the context of our Anglican community, formal blessings are reserved for those who are priests. But that is misleading in terms of what blessings are. They can and should be given by us all. We are to bless each other. So again let me return to the idea of a cycle of blessing. We need to know that we are blessed. As the American hymn writer Johnson Oatman put it over 100 years ago:

Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your blessings, see what God hath done;
Count your blessings, name them one by one;
And it will surprise what the Lord hath done.

In the hymn we began the service with today, I tried to list some of the many blessings God has given us. Each of us can personalise those blessings if we take time to reflect. The more we realise we are blessed, the more we can be channels of blessing. We have the opportunities to share the blessing with others. The hymn writer Fred Kaan put it very powerfully when he wrote 'Bless us

only so that we in turn may bless the world.' And thinking back to that business of the words in Psalm 103 and 104, the more we realize how much God has blessed us, the more we will want to bless God, the praise God for his goodness.

So count your blessings, share a blessing, be a blessing. We have received so much. We are called to share it – and that will be reflected in our last hymn which begins 'Sent forth by God's blessing'.