

## Prayer for Non-Communicants

### The Blessing of Worshippers within the Christian Tradition

#### The Biblical Background

The Old Testament knows two quite different types of blessing. The first is the form whereby the greater pronounces a blessing over the lesser. Thus, for example, God blesses the male and female he has created (Genesis 1.28) and he blesses Abraham (Genesis 12.1-3; 22.17). By such blessings God confers upon the recipients the benefits he wishes them to have. Human beings also bless one another: Isaac blesses Jacob his son (Genesis 27.27-29) and Israel blesses his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48.15-16). Although such expressions could be interpreted as being no more than pious good wishes from one person to another, that is not how the Old Testament understands them. Rather such blessings are seen as imparting to others the divine blessing through those who have received it. For that reason its outcome is sure and once uttered cannot be revoked (Numbers 23.20).

Within a cultic context, after offering sacrifice on behalf of the people, the priests or Levites would then bestow God's blessing on them. Thus, Moses is told by God to instruct Aaron and his sons to say: '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' (Numbers 6.22-26); and Aaron himself lifts up his hands towards the people and blesses them after making ritual offerings (Leviticus 9.22). Deuteronomy 10.8 describes God setting apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark, to stand before the Lord and minister to him, and to bless in his name (see also Deuteronomy 21.5).

The second type of blessing is the reverse, the blessing of the greater by the lesser, specifically the blessing of God by human beings. Examples include Genesis 24.26-27, where Abraham's servant, having successfully found a wife for Isaac, Abraham's son gives praise to God for the accomplishment of his mission: 'The man bowed his head and worshipped the Lord and said: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master."' This form later developed into the standard pattern of synagogue prayer, the *berakah*.

Early Christian usage, however, showed a preference instead for a variant of this form, the *hodayah* or thanksgiving, which in Greek used the verb *eucharisteo* in an active rather than a passive voice, 'We give thanks to you, O Lord....because....' The New Testament also picks up on the first

type of blessing: Christians are instructed to bless and not curse those who persecute them (Romans 12.14; 1 Peter 3.9); but there is nothing to indicate whether any blessings occurred within a formal liturgical context.

## **Liturgical History**

Early Christian writings are similarly silent on this matter, and it is not until the fourth century that we have firmer evidence for such a use. Here we encounter them in the form of dismissal prayers that ask God to confer blessing on the particular group who are being dismissed.

Thus, the Sacramentary of Sarapion, a mid-century book of presidential prayers from Egypt, includes among its texts several prayers of blessing accompanying a laying-on of hands (Prayers 3, 6, 28 & 29) that seems to be intended for the dismissal of various groups of people, including both catechumens and also other non-communicants, possibly those undergoing penitential discipline. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, a church order dating from around the end of the third quarter of the century, includes in its eucharistic liturgy a series of prayers for different categories of people who for various reasons were required to leave the assembly after the ministry of the word and before the eucharistic action – catechumens, those possessed by evil spirits, those soon to be baptized, and penitents. In each case the deacon bids the assembly pray for them and then instructs the particular group to bow their heads for a blessing. The bishop then pronounces what it sometimes terms a blessing and sometimes a prayer. In all cases, however, it follows the same form and would be more accurately described as a prayer than as a blessing in modern terminology. The eucharistic rite itself also ends with the deacon bidding the faithful to bow down for a blessing, and the bishop says a prayer over them. A similar practice is also described by the pilgrim Egeria, who visited Jerusalem during the 380s. Although she does not give any information with regard to the eucharistic liturgy, she states that the daily services included prayers of blessing of both the catechumens and the faithful.

In addition, Egeria also refers to another custom, not previously mentioned in other early sources. She describes how at the end of every one of the Jerusalem daily services, after the dismissal prayers, all the people come to the bishop's hand one by one to receive an individual blessing. This apparently informal act looks like an early example of what will later develop into the blessing as we know it, and probably emerged as a consequence of the bishop's office coming to be understood from the third century onwards as the counterpart of the priesthood of the Old Testament.

Similar practices are documented for the later rites of both East and West. In the Roman eucharistic rite of the seventh century, for example, there was a prayer over the people (*super populum*) for divine help and protection at the end, which was preceded by a bidding to bow down and receive a blessing. Then, when the dismissal had been given and the Pope left the altar, different groups of ministers in turn requested a blessing from him. Other sources reveal the extension of this final blessing to priests when they presided in place of the bishop. Moreover, the later disappearance of the *oratio super populum* from the Roman rite except during Lent would have given this blessing greater prominence, as would the growing practice of worshippers receiving communion only rarely. The blessing became in practice a blessing of non-communicants on most occasions, and by the later Middle Ages it was being given to the congregation as a whole from the altar rather than to individuals after leaving it, and it became more formal in character.

However, even though we know from earlier sources that this final blessing existed, liturgical texts as such do not begin to mention it until the later Middle Ages, presumably because prior to this it had still been regarded as a devotional act outside the confines of the rite proper and only practised when requested. This explains the remark in a Dominican *Ordinarium* of 1256: 'Let a blessing be given according to the custom of the country if it be the custom of the country and if there are strangers present who expect it.'

Because the liturgical forms known to the sixteenth-century Reformers included a final blessing in their eucharistic rites, one was included in the 1549 Prayer Book, and thereby became a standard feature of Anglican eucharistic practice, and eventually given to communicants and non-communicants alike, when the latter began to stay until the end of the service rather than leaving at an earlier point in the service. It was not until the Parish Communion movement of the twentieth century, however, that the idea of imparting individual blessings to non-communicants returned to the liturgical scene. For the first time in the Anglican tradition large numbers of children were now regularly present at a full celebration of the Eucharist, whereas previously they would normally have attended only Morning or Evening Prayer or Sunday School. There was a natural desire to include these children in some way within the eucharistic action, and thus began the practice of bringing unconfirmed children to the communion rail at the time of communion in order for them to receive a blessing with laying on hands from the minister who was administering the consecrated bread to communicants. Because this minister would always have been a priest (or bishop) at the time, the question of deacons or laypeople giving blessings did not arise. The same practice also tended to be adopted when members of other churches which were not in communion with the Church of England were present at a celebration of the Eucharist: they too were invited to come to the place of

communion for a blessing. However, when lay ministers later began to administer the consecrated bread, the issue of what they were to say to any non-communicants presenting themselves came to the fore. This eventually gave rise to Note 21 in *Common Worship Holy Communion*: 'At the distribution, any of those distributing the sacrament, ordained or lay, may pray for any non-communicants who come forward in these or other suitable words: "May God be with you" or "May God bless you".'

## **Theological Issues and Perspectives**

As indicated above, the custom of ordained ministers bestowing blessings on worshippers, as distinct from saying a prayer that asked God to bless them, seems to have entered Christian practice as the inevitable consequence of the ordained ministry coming to be understood as the counterpart of the Old Testament priesthood and thus acquiring the equivalent of its functions, although it has been continued even in some Christian traditions that do not regard their ministers in this light. It is common practice in the Free Churches, for instance, for the presiding minister to announce God's blessing over the congregation at the conclusion of a service.

However, as indicated, there is greater historical evidence to indicate the practice of giving individual blessings, as distinct from a general concluding liturgical blessing.

We have already noted, for example, the blessing of individuals, catechumens, pilgrims, as well as the faithful, and the nuptial blessing in a Christian celebration of marriage also provides a good case in point. As we have noted, the pressing issue for some, and one which evidently exercised the minds of some in the early church, as shown by the strictures in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, is the question of who may, and may not pronounce a formal blessing. The underlying issue was not so much a question of cultic competence or power (although these factors emerged in systematic reflection from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards) but of the one blessing being in some sense a recognised *representative* figure. Thus in the Old Testament narratives it is patriarchs as well as the priests who convey blessings.

Our theological view of blessing is informed not only by our reading of scripture and liturgical history, but also by our reflection on pastoral practice and wider human sciences. The social anthropologist, for instance, could point our attention to the social processes of inclusion and exclusion, often articulated in forms of blessings and cursing. Indeed, much of our social interaction trades on the religious vocabulary of blessing and cursing, from the idiomatic tick of Graham Norton 'Oh, bless!' to the aggressive expression: 'to hell with you!' The vocabulary of

blessing and cursing is also found in more conventional greetings and farewells, which significantly, are utterances often accompanied by physical gestures. The familiar word 'goodbye' is, of course, a contracted form of 'God be with you', which linguistically, is an indirect form of blessing, and one generally accompanied with a handshake.

It could be argued that such linguistic forms of communication are traces of Christian language and historic liturgical practice. But the persistence of such speech might also be indicative of a more general human impulse to bless, that is, to name a person, thing, or situation in a way which linguistically places that which is addressed in a different register and frame of reference. Theologically and pastorally, this would be to place a wretched situation into the arena of grace, as, for instance, in blessing a room in which a person has been disturbed, or, conversely, in the recognition that what is experienced is something God given, as the blessing of bride and groom at a wedding is a response to the evident mutual love between them.

The need to bless could well spring from a general human impulse, rather like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, who at the sight of creaturely life 'blessed them unawares'. Human beings are created in the *imago dei*, and in part, this attribution carries with it the connotation of a priestly function of placing value on God's creation and in re-claiming it for God's good purposes. This priestly task is explicitly enjoined upon the baptised people of God, on those designated as being a priestly people. Christians are to bless and not to curse, to recover and reclaim that which is spoilt and lost in human relationships. This general task is focussed, and in our liturgical life becomes explicit in the ministry of those ordained to presbyteral ministry. The Declaration in the new Ordinal for the ordination of priests, as in the earlier ASB Ordinal, states that the ordained are 'to bless the people in God's name.' The International Anglican Liturgical Consultation (IALC) Statement 'To Equip the Saints' is equally explicit and states that the presbyter is to 'announce God's blessing in order that the whole priestly people of God may be witnesses of reconciliation and agents of blessing in the world.' (Paul Gibson, ed, 'To Equip the Saints'. Findings of the Sixth International Anglican International Liturgical Consultation, Berkeley, California, 2001. Grove Books, 2002, p.5)  
<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/liturgy/docs/berkeley.pdf>

## **Liturgical Practice**

Needless to say, our liturgical practice needs to be consonant with our best theological and historical understandings. Although there is not unanimity regarding the necessity for a blessing at the end of the service of Holy Communion, it is common practice. The range of seasonal blessings has been substantially expanded in the *Common Worship*

resource books: *New Patterns for Worship* and *Times and Seasons*. Each of these leads into the episcopal form: 'and the blessing of God Almighty', cast in explicit Trinitarian language. As part of the dismissal rite, the blessing is a general blessing for the whole assembled congregation.

A Trinitarian blessing to non-communicants during administration of Communion could introduce an element of confusion or duplication, and for this reason we concur with the view that a Trinitarian form of blessing should not be given to non-communicants at this point in the service. The guidance given in Note 21 of *Common Worship: Holy Communion* seems to agree, but the direction 'in these or other similar words' does not exclude a Trinitarian blessing at this point.

We have already remarked above on the indirect form of words suggested in Note 21, but further reflection of the immediate context of the blessing of non-communicants could sharpen our sense of what might best be said at this point of the service, by either an ordained or lay administrator. The focus at this moment of the Eucharist is on the action of the giving and receiving of the gifts of Communion. Consequently, the administration of Holy Communion is not the moment for extended and spontaneous words of prayer, and both ordained and lay administrators of Communion would be well advised to use a prayer-blessing formula for those non-communicants who are presented, or for whatever reason present themselves expecting some word of prayer.

Again, reflection on the immediate context of the blessing of non-communicants might lead us to consider the two forms of prayer suggested in Note 21 as being rather imprecise, not because of their subjunctive mood, but in terms of the generic subject 'God'. Following the Eucharistic prayer, the giving of thanks over bread and wine, what is happening at this moment of the Eucharist is the commemoration of Christ, and so it follows that 'Christ' would be the more apt subject of the blessing-prayer. Hence the Christic reference in our specific suggestions.

Further, previous discussions noted above have also noted the combination of words and gestures in blessing-prayers, and although no mention of appropriate gestures is given in Note 21, it may be useful to give the matter some further thought. Given the increasing sensitivity regarding physical touch in our society, it is probably advisable that the gesture is a formalised and repeated one. We suggest, at least for adults, the placing of a hand on the shoulder.

## **Suggestions**

The suggestions here follow from the earlier discussions of the issues, summarised above, and from our own further theological reflection and

reading of the liturgical history. It needs to be borne in mind that non-communicants tend to fall into distinct groups:

- the very young, not yet admitted to communion;
- older people who do not wish to become communicants;
- members of other churches whose discipline prevents them from receiving communion.

1. We would affirm the validity of pronouncing a 'soft' form of blessing to non-communicants at the administration of Communion.
2. In agreement with earlier deliberations by previous Liturgical Commissions we would urge the use of forms which could be said by either lay or ordained administrators of Communion. In addition, we would urge that the 'blessing' is said by the administrator of the Eucharistic bread, and would discourage any repetition of the blessing or word of prayer offered by the administrator of the Communion cup.
3. As to the actual form of words, we suggest:  
  
    'May Christ who welcomes you, give you his blessing.'  
  
    'May Christ fill you with his life and his love.'  
  
    - or, in the case of infants and young children  
  
    'May the Lord Jesus bless you and keep you.'
4. We suggest that the words be accompanied by the placing of a hand on the head.

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