

Sermon on Wednesday 20 January 2021

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Readings: Numbers 6. 22-27; Matthew 5. 1-10

Blessings

I am always looking for silver linings and I found one the other day. I realised I haven't had a cold all winter. This makes sense when you think about the fact that we are not really mixing with anyone and, when we do, we wear a face mask. 'Hands, face, space' has this extra advantage, it seems.

When it comes to leaving space between us, I am sure there are people who think one metre is enough, but did you know that when we sneeze, we do so at 100 miles an hour, so the water droplets can travel at least twice that far? Two metres is better.

Other interesting sneezing facts: it is not possible to stop a sneeze once it starts; you cannot sneeze in your sleep as the relevant nerves are resting; and the world record for sneezing is held by a lady called Donna who sneezed for 978 days, poor woman.

But the other thing about sneezing is that it is common to say 'Bless you' when someone sneezes. No-one is quite sure why. Here are two theories. Firstly, that in the dark ages Pope Gregory The First suggested saying 'God bless you', because sneezing was a symptom of the bubonic plague. The hope was that the prayer

would avert death. The second theory is that superstition believed you lost a part of your soul when you sneezed. The blessing, therefore, protected both the one who sneezed and the people around them from those wandering bits of lost soul.

In today's readings we hear of two blessings. The familiar one from Numbers still used by priests today and the beatitudes which ask for blessing on various groups of people.

In a church context a blessing, such as the Numbers one, is a set of words, usually spoken by a priest. While the blessing of people is what immediately comes to mind, actually you can bless anything – houses, ships, new ventures, journeys. On Mothering Sunday, we bless the flowers we take home. On Palm Sunday, the crosses are blessed. There is a custom of writing a blessing on door lintels at New Year, with chalk that's also been blessed.

Being given authority to articulate God's blessing is one of the gifts of ordination, but anyone can do it, just as we do when someone sneezes. The authority part does take some getting used to; I remember when I first came to Hertford as a curate, I was walking through town in my dog collar and a lady said to me 'God bless you'. I was so surprised I just responded, 'Thank you'. I still think that's a good response.

But a blessing isn't always words. Most blessings are gifts – and they are always a good one. When Jesus

says 'blessed be the peacemakers', he means may their lives be full of blessings, may good things happen to them. Realistically, he recognises that this may have to wait for their eternal life. This world does not always treat the poor, the peacemaker or the pure in heart well.

So, when I say a formal blessing, or anyone does, we are asking that God gives you good things, that he keeps you safe, that he brings you joy. The words of a 'blessing' prayer, ask God to gift 'blessings' to someone.

I am lucky that my life is full of blessings. There are many wonderful gifts that brighten my days and bring me happiness. And like most people, I often take those for granted. If 2020 taught me anything, it's to count my blessings. Because it turns out I took a lot of things for granted which I ought to have been more thankful for. I only missed them or valued them when they were withheld.

When I look back on 2020, the things I want to remember are those small patches of metaphorical sunshine or blessings.

There was the day we met my oldest daughter and her husband for a walk at Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire, the very weekend the first lockdown ended.

There were the few days in July we spent in Wales, by the sea, seeing my parents.

There was Midnight Mass at Christmas.

There was my son's wedding.

And there was the visit to the tip to get rid of my garden rubbish after I'd trimmed the hedge. Not only did I get rid of the rubbish, but I also bumped into a friend there. A double blessing. And so it goes on.

Most of my happy memories of blessings in 2020 are people related, but not all. I consider the fact that Strictly Come Dancing was still on also to be a massive blessing.

Your memories of blessings may be similar to mine. A telephone call or meeting. A shared meal. A brilliant jigsaw, or book, or piece of music. A walk. Coffee drunk seated in the garden. A Thought for the Day or a WhatsApp message. There are so many ways to be blessed.

On Thursday, in the Waitrose car park, I bumped into the Reader from my previous church. She is the fulltime carer of a very poorly husband. She said to me she counts her blessings every day – saying thank you for each cup of tea and for the hot water of her shower. Blessings are not just happy events, but also the tiny things that we often take for granted.

Each blessing reminds us that our faith is based on a Gospel of hope. A belief that God is behind us, around us and before. A belief that we should never take for granted those small gifts which make our lives joyful.

That we should treasure the precious memories of past blessings. That we should have confidence in the hope of future blessings.

When you feel downhearted, count your blessings large and small. Soak in the words when someone else blesses you. And if you sneeze and are on your own, say 'Bless you' to yourself. Because we all need to be blessed.

