

Blessed For Blessing (Genesis 1: 1-5)

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The reading we just heard was the reading at our very first Benedictus service – here in this very place, on 4th February 2012. At the time, I commented that it might seem a little ambitious to launch a new worshipping community with the story of the first day of creation. Surely the implied comparison was a tad overblown! But I also said that what had drawn me to this passage for that occasion wasn't so much its telling of a momentous beginning, as its insistence that blessing is built into the fabric of the universe. Since our name, 'Benedictus' means blessed, that seemed worth reflecting on.

As you know, the persistent refrain throughout this Genesis story is that God calls forth and then affirms the goodness of the world. And that's what blessing is. To bless, *benedicere* in Latin, means simply to 'speak goodness'. To bless is both to recognise and strengthen a goodness that's there; and it's to invoke goodness in such a way as to bring it into being, to generate more of it. Think of the way a parent's blessing of a child both affirms and strengthens who they essentially are, and seeks to call forth goodness from and for the future. May the road rise to meet you. May the sun be always at your back. May you know yourself loved.

According to the story of creation, this practice, this possibility of blessing comes from God who creates to bless. Who seeks the world's goodness first by calling it forth: 'Let there be light'; and who strengthens the world's goodness by recognising it: 'and God saw that it was good, and God saw that it was very good'. In his book of blessings, called *Benedictus*, Irish priest and poet John O'Donohue says something similar: 'Despite all the darkness', he writes, 'human hope is based on the instinct that at the deepest level of reality some intimate kindness holds sway. This is

the heart of blessing. To believe in blessing is to believe that our being here, our very presence in the world, is itself the ... primal blessing'.¹

Well, at our first service, almost 8 years ago, I spoke of how I hoped this sense of blessing built into the nature of things would shape our life together. I hoped that when we gathered for worship, we could expect to be blessed, to encounter for ourselves the radical goodness of the One who calls us into life and calls us to be here. I hoped the more we allowed this encounter, the more we let ourselves be blessed and strengthened in goodness, the more we'd become capable of offering blessing in our turn, affirming and evoking the goodness of life in the world. Just as the spaces of earth and sea and sky blessed by God in the story of creation themselves begin to generate more life, so the blessed space of our prayer, our gathering, our community would bring forth its own life and creativity and gift.

And it seems to me that our hopes have been realised, that we have allowed ourselves to be blessed and so to become a blessing. I'm not saying we're perfect. In the Christian vision, we're always on the way, always beginning again, always growing in holiness and towards wholeness. Our capacity truly to bless and enable life is connected to our transformation, and this is a lifetime's commitment. It involves a process of continuous conversion, being willing in prayer and through the sometimes difficult aspects of common life to allow our wounds to be uncovered so as to be healed, to acknowledge where we're stuck, fearful and miserly so as to be freed and expanded.

Yet – think of what *has* changed or is in the process of changing for each of us. Think of the different ways we've been awakened, our healing deepened, our freedom to be and our love enlarged. Through shared silence and conversation, through practices of reflection and hospitality, music, friendship and mutual forbearance we've each been blessed and we've blessed each other. And through us

¹ John O'Donohue, *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings* (London: Bantam Press, 2007), p.200.

and the life of this community, others have received blessing too – I'm thinking of the many people who have come and gone over the years, the spaces offered for children and their families through Kaleidoscope, for young adults through Kalchaino, for people who live in other places through our website. We have received so much, given so much and have so much to be thankful for, to celebrate in our life together.

And today, as we gather for the last time in this place, at Holy Covenant, we acknowledge how all this has been profoundly undergirded and enabled by the blessing of this place and this parish community. A community which also knows what it is to be blessed by God and so be a space generative of blessing, of life and goodness.

We began here, we were first offered hospitality at Holy Covenant by Susanna Pain and Nikolai Blaskow, when Susanna was rector. And from the beginning, the space itself has held and helped to form us – our worship in the round with the spaciousness of this outlook and this soaring tent of meeting; our centrepieces and suppers, our musicians leading from behind, and that bloody piece of string for setting out the chairs at the end which became such an unlikely source of bonding and hilarity when others joined Neil in that weekly task.

Of course, the hospitality of Holy Covenant has extended far beyond our use of this physical space. From the beginning, we were encouraged and welcomed by many members of the parish who seemed glad to know we were here; we've been offered friendship and support by those working in the office at different times (thinking especially of Paul, Merri, Libby and Phil); we've been affirmed in our place here by succeeding parish councils and rectors, up to and including Wayne – who's been warm, generous and unconditional in his support for our being here for as long as we wanted and needed, and I can't tell you, Wayne, what a difference that's made as we've discerned this move.

Often, when people have visited Benedictus and realised the nature of our relationship with Holy Covenant, they've commented on the generosity of this church. A number have said they can't imagine the parish they're part of allowing the presence and growth of another congregation alongside theirs. Yet Holy Covenant's willingness to make space for Benedictus has enabled us to begin, establish and flourish. It's thanks to your unthreatened and large-minded hospitality that we're now in a position to branch out on the next stage of our journey and for this gift we will be forever grateful.

So, tonight is a time of mixed emotions for us. It's an ending and beginning, and I suspect for both our communities. There's sadness for things we'll miss, for the familiarity of being here, being alongside you; there's a degree of nervousness about what's next – what it will feel like to gather in a different space, alongside a different community. And yet there is also a sense of being drawn on, of it being time to leave our first 'home', and so discover more of what John O'Donohue calls 'our hidden life, and the urgencies that deserve to claim us'.²

Thank you, Holy Covenant, for creating space for us to come into being, for making us welcome. Thank you for the friendship we've shared, which we hope will continue; for the generous and non-competitive spirit in which we've worshipped together on this site and shared its beauty and gifts.

Life begins *as* blessing, *for* blessing. You have blessed us richly, and tonight we bless you, we recognise and affirm the goodness in you and we wish goodness for you. And as we go our ways, let us together give thanks for the way the Spirit of God continues active in both our communities, drawing each of us on to new ventures, new collaborations, new ways of participating in and for the goodness of things, the blessing of God's world.

² From 'For the Traveller', in *Benedictus*, p.70.