

4 February 2012

On Blessing I – Genesis 1.1-5

Sarah Bachelard

Worship is a strange thing, when you stop to think about it. And when you form a new community of worship you *do* stop to think about it. What are we doing here? What is the point of it? What are we each hoping for, longing for? What are we seeking together?

Of all the things that spiritual communities do, worship is the one thing that has no parallel in other kinds of community. Other groups gather in order to serve others and work for justice; they gather for friendship and mutual support; they even gather to reflect about their lives and vocations, to seek transformation in themselves and their relationships with others. But *worship* – directing our attention to the ultimate reality we call God, invoking and addressing God, singing and praising God, listening for, yielding to God, opening our lives to this reality infinitely beyond what we can control or understand – that is something different entirely. And when our friendship and community, our service and search for justice and truth, when these things flow out of worship – then they are different too.

What are we doing when we worship? As I experience it, we are opening ourselves to encounter with an Other (capital 'O'). Worship has to do with our longing to be in touch with what is ultimately real, a bedrock truth that will bring us to greater reality and truthfulness and groundedness. It has to do with coming home – belonging in the deepest way to ourselves and others, no longer divided by anxiety, comparisons, anger, hurt, despair, fear. It is about the possibility of *being* whole, an integral, loved and welcome participant in the abundant communion of life. The great dynamic and promise of worship is that by opening ourselves to encounter

what is ultimately whole and real and true, we become more whole and real and true and alive ourselves. That is why we are here.

In the biblical tradition, to encounter and be encountered by this ultimate reality, by God, is to be blessed – and it is the way we become sources of blessing for others. We have called this community *Benedictus* – which means blessed. We seek to be a community that is a *place* of blessing – a place where God is encountered in this deeply transforming way – and so to become a community that is a *source* of blessing – a community from which God’s blessing flows out to the world.

What does it mean to be blessed? To be a blessing? I have spoken of encountering truth and reality and wholeness – but this can feel pretty abstract. Can we bring these words down to earth a bit more, give them flesh in our lives? In the next two or three weeks, I want to explore with you some of the facets of blessedness and blessing that are illuminated in the Scriptures and to ponder what blessing, being encountered by God, might mean for us and this community and, through it, for the communities of which we are part.

It might seem a little cute, not to say ambitious, to begin these reflections and to launch the life of our gathering with the story of the first day of creation. Surely the implied comparison is a little overblown! Maybe a little! But I have chosen this reading not primarily because of the echo of beginning but because it is a story about blessing – blessing woven through the very fabric of life, blessing as constitutive of life.

The story in Genesis 1 contrasts profoundly with other creation stories that were dominant at the time in the Ancient Near East. In *Enuma Elish* (the Babylonian creation story) the universe comes into being as a result of conflict among the gods. On this account, the cosmos is formed from the corpse of the primordial mother god Tiamat who is brutally killed by Marduk (the god of Babylon). But in Genesis 1, God simply appears, there is no history recounted, no biography given, there are no

bragging heralds or messy battles, just the theologically profound statement: ‘In the beginning *God...*’ God is ultimate reality; it is from this ultimate reality that the whole of creation, the whole of life flows.

How does life flow from God? In the Babylonian story, human beings are created from the blood of another murdered god in order to *serve* the gods. Life comes out of violence and death. By contrast, in Genesis, the world is freely and gently spoken into being. The reality of God encounters chaos, ‘waste and welter’ as one translation has it, simply as one who brings possibility into being for no reason, as sheer gift. Our translation speaks of a wind from God sweeping over the face of the waters, but the Hebrew could equally be translated as the breath of God hovering over the waters – as an eagle hovers over her young. God hovers, lingers, unafraid of chaos; for, as unlikely as it may appear, this chaotic darkness, these primeval waters already contain *all* that is needed to create a world of wonder and delight, a rich and vital universe. And when God speaks light into being, freely and without necessity, it is with invocation rather than forcing: ‘let there be light’. This is the language of blessing – which is never command, but always an opening to and evocation of possibility: *May* the road rise up to meet you; *Let* it be unto me.

As the chapter unfolds, we see that God first of all creates spaces – of light and darkness, sky and land and sea, and then the spaces are filled with plants and animals, fish and birds. Notice, though, that God does not fill these directly, but invites the spaces to become agents of creation themselves. On Day Three, God says to the dry Land, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation’, and on Day Five, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures’, and so on. Creativity sparks more creativity, giving spawns more giving, this is the way of God *and* of God’s world, an abundance of grace. God creates hospitable spaces and these in turn nurture life.

And, like a refrain throughout the chapter, as each thing comes into being, as each thing participates in the dance of creation, God sees that it is good, indeed, that it is very good. In the Latin, that is the essence of blessing: to recognise and name

goodness, to confer goodness, well-being in speech – ‘bene’ (goodly, well) and ‘dicere’ (to say, to speak). To speak goodness into being.

The story of Genesis 1 is a testimony about the fundamental nature of reality – the reality of God and the reality of our world. Chaos, something unformed and undifferentiated, not productive of life, is encountered by, seen by, hovered over by God, and from that encounter comes life and sources of life. Blessing is somehow about this encounter with God who just is; it is about possibility, gift and being made generative; it is about being strengthened in being and goodness. And that means that blessing is present from the beginning, that life is the outworking of blessing.

What does this story mean for us? Well, it testifies to the possibility of receiving our very lives as blessing, each one a gift through which we might participate in and generate life in our turn. We learn whether this is a true story as we try it out; as we practice gratitude for this gift, as we bring our darkness and chaos to God, and discover that God can see possibility where we cannot; that light can be brought forth from darkness. We discover that the more fully we receive our life from God, the more life we generate; we are made spacious in order to create space for others; we are blessed in order to bless. And maybe there will be surprises in this – for who knew that the sky space would bring forth pelicans, or the earth space blue-tongue lizards. Blessing promises creativity, surprise; blessing promises fullness of life.

How do we bring ourselves to this encounter? How do we receive the blessing of our life? Well – one way is in the silence of meditation. We come into the present moment, bringing all that we are – all that is light in us and all that is dark, what is chaotic and hurting and unformed as well as what is spacious and ordered; we invite the Spirit of God to hover over us and to evoke in us the possibilities and gifts that God sees.