

East Durham Methodist Circuit:

13th February 2022

Prepared by Bill Naylor and Ann Riding

Theme: Abundant Blessings

Welcome and Call to worship:

Isn't it wonderful that the days are lengthening and it's starting to feel like spring is just around the corner. It's just one of the Blessings we have and it's relevant because today we're going to be thinking about the blessings we enjoy, the physical ones we receive on a daily basis but also the spiritual blessing that we enjoy through having Jesus in our lives.

Every blessing You pour out, I'll turn back to praise. Blessed be Your glorious name

Prayer of Approach:

Dear Lord, it is such a privilege for us to come together to worship You this morning. We come to hear Your word and receive Your blessing on our praise and thanksgiving and to ask for Your blessing upon our lives and works of Christian service in the coming week, which we undertake in praise of Your wonderful name. **Amen**

So let's join together now and continue our thanks and praise by singing Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King, number 77 in Singing the Faith.

Hymn: Give thanks to the Lord our God and King Chris Tomlin StF: 77

1. Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King
His love endures forever
For He is good, He is above all things
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise

2. With a mighty hand and outstretched arm
His love endures forever
For the life that's been reborn
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise

Forever, God is faithful
Forever, God is strong
Forever, God is with us
Forever

3. From the rising to the setting sun
His love endures forever
And by the grace of God, we will carry on
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise, yeah

Forever, God is faithful
Forever, God is strong
Forever, God is with us
Forever, forever.

Reading: Jeremiah 17:5-10 Joy in God's Faithfulness New International Version

⁵ This is what the Lord says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord.

⁶ That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

⁷ “But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. ⁸ They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? ¹⁰ “I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.”

Prayers of praise, thanksgiving, confession and dedication:

Dear Lord, we have no other God but You. We praise You and revere Your mighty name. You created everything, the things that we can see and things unseen, hidden from our sight or beyond our knowledge. From the tiniest sub-atomic particles and single-celled expression of life to the mightiest structures and creatures on our planet and the universe beyond, You created them.

You made Humankind. Each and every one of us is known to You. Our outward appearance. Our innermost thoughts. Our hopes and dreams all revealed through Your Holy Spirit embedded in our hearts.

Forgive us our sins O Lord. We know that we have fallen short, but trust that if we genuinely repent of our wrongdoings that You will be merciful and gentle, loving and kind, forgiving us these sins and filling us with the assurance that our sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

We dedicate ourselves again to You now and ask these prayers in the name of Jesus who taught us to say:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done - on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever.**

Amen

Reading: Luke 6: 17 - 26 Blessings and Woes New International Version

¹⁷ He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, ¹⁹ and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

²⁰ Looking at his disciples, he said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²² Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

²³ “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

²⁵ Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Hymn: **Blessed be Your name** Matt and Beth Redman **StF: 41**

1. Blessed Be Your Name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance
flow
Blessed be Your name
And blessed Be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed Be Your name

**Every blessing You pour out, I'll
Turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord
Still I will say
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious name**

2. Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's 'all as it should be'
Blessed be Your name
And blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name

Every blessing...

You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord, blessed be Your name

God you give and take away
Oh you give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord, blessed be Your name

Every blessing...

Message:

We've heard two readings from the Lectionary today. Both the OT lesson from Jeremiah and the Gospel reading from Luke focus on Blessings and woes! And today is Racial Justice Sunday.

So where shall we start?

Well as I'm sure you will know, the passage from Luke's Gospel is the start of what's known as 'the sermon on the plain' and it closely mirrors the better known 'sermon on the mount' which is Matthew's version of the same event... or maybe these were actually two separate occasions, Matthew's version being the one Jesus told to the young and fit who could get up the mountain and Luke's version being the one Jesus saved for us oldies - the sermon with disabled access... and free parking. 'Cos you can bet your bottom dollar that during His ministry, Jesus will have repeated His messages time and time again. And it's very clear, because Luke tells us this, that Jesus was already famous, a renowned healer and teacher who commanded a very large following.

With everyone assembled, Jesus opens with a poem featuring four pairs of blessings and woes. They can be summed up as one, namely Blessed are have-nots and woe to those who have. It's a tough one - that those in possession of life's blessings are actually the ones at a disadvantage. It's exactly the opposite of what people would have thought to be the case. Back then, people thought that riches were a sign of God's favour and poverty was the result, and a reflection of, a sinful life or background. Remember the tale of the rich man who was reluctant to give all he had to the poor as Jesus had asked?

24 Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 26 Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" (Luke 18: 24-26)

These days we don't believe that poverty is derived from ours or our forebears' sins, but in a secular society we certainly conflate wealth and position with greatness - just look at the Queen's Honours system for example. Not many - if any - Knighthoods and Damehoods are given out to people who have led a life of dedicated voluntary service as the local lollipop person for the last 20 years... or training the under 11s football team... they might get a BEM or perhaps an MBE if they're lucky.

Not that I think that having a few bob to spare in the Bank is of itself what Jesus is getting at, what we're talking about here is the risk that you think you are self-sufficient in material terms and can deal with everything from your own resources. The mad-house is this way... the way to an "I'm all right Jack" mentality shutting you off in your own ivory tower ignoring the plight of others less fortunate, even blaming them for 'not getting a grip'. That's how 'othering' begins... more of that to come

But it's deeper than that. Let's have a think about the basic concept of being 'Blessed'.

I'd like you to think about how 'Blessed' your life has been.

I've always considered myself as 'Blessed'. I enjoy good health and I'm still fairly fit. Not as fit as the proverbial butcher's dog running away with a string of purloined sausages perhaps, but I can be pretty nippy when it's necessary, particularly when the wife's on my tail!

But I know it could change in the blink of an eye - two years ago I slipped on ice and snapped my right quads tendon resulting in an operation and weeks of rehab. You wouldn't notice it but I know that the leg is not as strong as it was, and it probably never will be.

I've had a modestly 'Blessed' working life - nothing mega - but enough to get me through life with a few bob to spare like I mentioned above.

And thinking about Valentine's Day tomorrow, I've definitely been 'Blessed' in love. with my soul mate of over 40 years with never (well hardly ever) a cross word

And in the light of Racial Justice Sunday, I've been 'Blessed' to be born a white male in a rich country so I've never been discriminated against. It breaks my heart to hear the racism from the trolls on social media or monkey chants from the football stands. It existed in Biblical times - why did Jesus' Good Samaritan parable pack such a punch? it was because the Jews hated the Samaritans!

This is also referenced in our text from Luke: ²² **Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.** ²³ **“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven...**

In 1890 Kipling wrote a famous poem about the British army in India. In my eyes, or to my ears, it's the antidote to racism. Take a look at **Gunga Din**. It's the story of a British Soldier serving in India and a local man who served as a water carrier. After suffering a lot of vile racism and some violence, Din saves the soldier's life and so the soldier ends with the famous line **'You're a better man than I am Gunga Din'**. Look it up - it's a great read and a powerful piece of writing.

If a man born into the greatest Empire the world had ever seen can write about racial equality, then you can argue that we haven't made much progress in the 130 years since it was written.

Racism, or indeed any '...ism' is to deny Jesus' blessing and His Great Commandment that we should "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbour as yourself." Because you can't love God if you do not love your neighbour!

I've often wondered where 'isms' come from. I think they are basically tribal, probably deeply embedded from our early days as hunter-gatherers when your survival depended upon your tribe - and that strangers - those 'others' - spelt danger!

One of my heroes, an LBC radio journalist called James O'Brien, says in his book **'How not to be wrong'** that without knowing it for what it is, most white people like me do not understand that, putting to one side all our hard work, we started out on the road of Life from a point a little higher up the ladder, enjoying an access to the networks needed to become successful by dint of class and/or skin colour, an access that similarly talented black and brown people did not - and arguably still do not - have. He calls it 'White Privilege.' I do not believe that the great majority of people are in the least bit racist but those of us who have white skin have almost certainly benefitted from a society that is systemically biased towards us.

On 'isms' generally, think Stephen Lawrence and George Floyd in terms of racism. Think 'Me too' as regards sexism, Think Bloody Sunday, Hillsborough or Orgreave in relation to institutional and class-based bias.

Oh, and how easy it is to **'other'** people and demonise those we don't know, and that's anyone who we don't feel is one of **us**. Doesn't have to be racial. Gays maybe? Or Newcastle United supporters (if you're a Sunderland fan)? Or people who don't worship like us perhaps, or at all?

Think back to Brexit and the very reasonable argument that we should be a sovereign nation rather than be governed from Brussels or Strasbourg. But then think how some of our politicians and some media stoked the demonisation of immigrants in the campaign: **'they'** take our jobs, **'they'** come here to take our benefits. In that scenario, **'Taking back Control'** seems somewhat darker... grooming people to a first step towards something quite unpleasant.

Now compare that with Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, the enemy that showed compassion when the Jewish observers of an injured man did not. I think we are all clear where, as Christians, we need to stand!

But over-riding everything, I am 'Blessed' as I hope you are, in having found Jesus and through our faith in Him, His death and resurrection that we can avail ourselves of God's forgiveness of our sins.

Because it's Jesus' sacrificial death in atonement for our sins and through it, our reconciliation with God that is God's Good News. In that, we are truly 'Blessed'.

Remember St Paul's words in Romans 5: 7-10.

⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

So we are 'Blessed' because Jesus died for us when we were yet sinful.

Rock climbers refer to the hardest part of any route as 'the crux' meaning: get over that, and you're home and dry, because the route's as good as done.

Now here's the crux of the matter we're discussing here. We are 'Blessed' if we believe in Jesus' amazing sacrifice. Our faith is meaningless if we do not accept that Jesus died for us and that our sins are forgiven. That death was beaten when He rose from the dead and that He is alive now and for all time. Think on the great gift that it is. Let's now hear another of today's lectionary texts. **1 Corinthians: 15-20**

¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

But remember also James 1:6 **But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.**

So may I repeat, and ask you again, How 'Blessed' is your life?

Hymn: Blessed Assurance

Fanny Crosby

StF: 548

1. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood

**This is my story, this is my song
Praising my Saviour all the day long
This is my story, this is my song
Praising my Saviour all the day long**

2. Perfect submission, perfect delight
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight
Angels descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love
This is my story...

3. Perfect submission, all is at rest
I in my Saviour am happy and blessed
Watching and waiting, looking above
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love
This is my story...

Prayers of Intercession:

Loving Lord , we thank You for the many blessings that have been talked about and recognised today as we worship. Forgive us that we sometimes don't notice them until it is too late to take action.

So now we pray for all of Your family and the world they have inherited. We pray for an end to racism, and injustice. We pray for those who have been ostracised, hated or rejected, because of their faith, religion or race.

Lord bring justice and joy to the suffering.

We pray for the hungry in our own country and in Yemen and Ethiopia and other places in this world. We remember that some are too proud to ask for help and just battle on.

Lord bring sustenance the hungry and provide for all needs.

We pray for all those who are in need of You and Your love at this time. Those in hospital waiting appointments, operations, tests, results and diagnoses. Those in mourning for loved ones, especially those who are close to us in this church family. Those in abusive and violent relationships, feeling deprived of love by all about them.

Lord heal all pain bring love and laughter back into their lives.

We pray for all who govern and guide no matter where they are. Help them to unite and lead us forward through the difficulties surrounding us: economically, internationally and healthwise.

Lord give them the power to guide with wisdom and truth.

For the church we ask that it may stand firm on Your kingdom values; serving as You would serve.

Lastly Lord we ask a blessing on ourselves. May the power of Your blessings be with us as we live in You, giving us the power with which to bless others. We know there are often barriers but we ask for the strength to overcome them, that your blessings may overflow to all around us.

We ask these prayers in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ

Amen

Hymn: 10,000 Reasons

Matt Redman

**Bless the Lord O my soul
O my soul
Worship His Holy name
Sing like never before
O my soul
I'll worship Your Holy name**

1. The sun comes up
It's a new day dawning
It's time to sing Your song again
Whatever may pass
And whatever lies before me
Let me be singing
When the evening comes
Bless the Lord...

2. You're rich in love
And You're slow to anger
Your name is great
And Your heart is kind
For all Your goodness
I will keep on singing
Ten thousand reasons
For my heart to find
Bless the Lord...

3. And on that day
When my strength is failing
The end draws near
And my time has come
Still my soul will sing
Your praise unending
Ten thousand years
And then forevermore
Bless the Lord...

Closing Prayer and Blessing:

Dear Lord, if anyone is in doubt, we pray for Your blessing on them that they will know that in You, all things are possible and that Your blessings on them are always available and free.

And so let us share the Grace together:

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. **Amen.**