

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
PENTECOST 7 (P10B), JULY 12, 2009  
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"Blessed be God..."

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ..."  
(Ephesians 1:3)

"Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." That's the way we begin our Eucharistic celebration every Sunday morning, unless it is the season of Lent, or Advent, when we use a more penitential introduction. In Easter, we celebrate the Resurrection by adding alleluias.

It seems quite commonplace now, but there was a time not long ago when it was different. In some parishes, after the opening hymn, the Service continued with the immediate recitation of the Collect for Purity, "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open..." Some clergy, feeling that an introduction was needed, would insert the words, "The Lord be with you," even though it was never authorized. The people would return the greeting with, "And with thy spirit." And before the priest could even utter the phrase "Let us pray," the traditional Episcopalian reflex action had occurred; every knee had bent and every head had bowed! Then came the new prayer book and suddenly we were saying something different, remaining upright and wondering why. The answer is to be found in our second lesson for today, the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians.

The Letter to the Ephesians is often referred to as a "circular letter." It was written not just to one church, but to a group of churches located in the area around Ephesus. Probably the letter was distributed to various churches of Asia Minor by one named Tychicus, who is mentioned at the end of the letter. Like most of the New Testament, this letter wasn't even considered "Scripture" until the fourth century. The letter had, however, special value, a special "holiness", because it was written by Paul when he was a prisoner in Rome, a fact indicated by his later reference to himself as "a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles."

The letter begins with a typical greeting: a statement of who is writing, his credentials, to whom the letter is addressed, and an opening benediction. "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus also faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Note that Paul always calls himself an apostle - it seems to carry a little more weight than "missionary." In the original Greek, the words "in Ephesus" are found in brackets, so that when they are removed, the letter could easily be circulated to other churches, as mentioned above. The salutation, "Grace to you and peace..." has traditionally been used to begin most public Services of Morning Prayer. One would think all of this to be a greeting sufficient for every need!

But Paul says, "No, this is not enough," and continues with a soaring doxology of praise to God, before he gets into the "meat" of his letter. When we think of a "doxology," or "word of glory," we immediately think of singing the words, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," or something like it. Paul, however, begins his doxology, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice immediately the similarity with the beginning of our Service; a

greeting to each other and a greeting to God, given while standing, in His honor. It all started with Paul. "Blessed be God," and so are we.

We are blessed, says Paul, by the very existence of Christ, the supreme blessing that we have received from God. He tells us that through Christ we have been the beneficiary of "every spiritual blessing." In the rest of the passage Paul tells us what some of those blessings are. But because he is caught up in the ecstasy of singing God's praise the specific blessings are difficult for us to find. Looking closely, however, we can see at least three specific blessings.

He begins by speaking of the fact that Christ chose us to be holy. Now when Paul uses the word "holy," his thought is that Christians are called to be God's "set-apart" people. That is to say, Christians are called to be different from the ordinary citizens of the world. The Christians is, as it were, a stranger in a foreign land.

Christ calls Christians to live as people who have special value in the midst of a world that sometimes seems to have lost all sense of "value." For example: Christians are to think peace when the world thinks war! Christians are to think sharing when the world thinks of hoarding. Christians are to think love when the world thinks hate.

A good description of the attitudes required of God's set-apart people is to be found in the beatitudes. The values Christ lifts up there are certainly not the values promoted by the modern advertising media. Yet, each of them is preceded by the assurance of blessedness. Paul says we are blessed because we have been chosen to practice this high way of Christ in the midst of a painful world. The blessing lies in being used by God to fill his world with the qualities that God values! Blessed be God, and so are we!

Next, Paul speaks of the blessing of being destined to be the children of God's love. Now, nothing is more pathetic than an unwanted child. We see them and the results of that lack of love all around us. In order to be "politically correct", we now call them the children of dysfunctional families, and many of us can trace our adult behavioral problems to these beginnings. On the other hand, nothing is to be celebrated more than a child who is wanted. In this parish we have experienced the latter on several occasions. Thus we have known joy that is hard to describe. Thus when Paul tells us that we are destined to be the children of God's love he is telling us that God longs for us to live in the same relationship with him as that of a child who is wanted! God longs to shower upon us his unending love. Blessed be God, and so are we!

The third blessing mentioned in this passage is more like a category. Paul speaks of God lavishing upon us the riches of grace. But what is grace? Over the years many definitions have been offered, but I love the one which says that grace "is receiving what we do not deserve!" One of my former Senior Wardens once said to me: "Imagine what it would be like if all of us *got* what we deserve!"

I think, for instance, of the story of John Newton, the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace." Newton started out life as a troublesome sailor. He was kicked out of the British navy because of his behavior, and soon after became the captain of a slave trading ship. Newton was known as a cruel shipmaster who profited immensely from the selling of human flesh. Throughout his rugged life, however, the voice of God kept calling him to a higher way. Nothing he did could silence that voice. So, ultimately he gave in to the insistent voice of God and became a Christian. What is even more "amazing" is that he also became a

priest of the Church of England, a fact that caused one rather sarcastic writer to say that Newton "got what he deserved!" Nevertheless, John Newton was moved to write a hymn, now included in our new hymnal, that describes the lavishness of God's grace as nothing less than "amazing." Blessed be God, and so are we!

Well, this has been a very nice little exegetical treatise on a particular lesson of the day. It's fun to do that now and then, but now it's time to apply it. We have all seen those bumper stickers and tee shirts that read "Have you hugged your child today?" Well here's a new one: "Have you blessed your God today?" I mean, have you really said "Thank you, God - you are blessed!" Have you as yet, in the midst of this busy Service of Worship, sincerely returned God's many blessings?

Whether you have or not, I can think of no more fitting summary and conclusion to this essay on Paul's doxology to God than for each of us, during one of the silences, or during the prayers that follow, to offer a prayer of thanks in its most simple form, Bless you, God!

Blessed be God, and *indeed*, so are we!