

A smile on the face of God. Numbers 6, 22-27.

English sermon 20th October 2019, Peter Lincoln

Today I would like to preach on one of my favourite Biblical texts, one that we normally would not hear in a sermon, but at the end of a service. So-called Aaronic or priestly blessing from the Book of Numbers.:

The Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

I love this text because it describes God as having a **face**, a face that is turned lovingly towards us. Make his face shine upon you. It seems that his face lights up when he looks at us, and when somebody's face lights up it is reasonable to assume that he is **smiling**. English writer Adrian Plass entitled one of his books "A smile on the face of God" and this seems to fit perfectly to the words of this blessing.

Depending on the way you **imagine God** this might seem unusual. If we see God as a strict judge keeping an eye on what we do, then a smiling God might come as a surprise. **Does God smile?** Or does he even laugh sometimes? Many years ago I was invited to give a talk on whether God has a sense of **humour**. Rather dangerous asking an Englishman to talk about that. But if I remember rightly I didn't fall into the temptation of claiming that God has an English sense of humour! **English humour** often tends to be a bit on the black side, finding amusement even in the worst situation. A good example is the inscription on the grave of Spike **Milligan**, a well-known English comedian. "I told you I was ill". Or the story of the English **colonel** forging ahead through the African jungle and being ambushed by natives. When the other soldiers catch up with him and find him lying with a spear sticking out of his chest, one of them asks him if it hurts. "Only when I laugh" came the prompt reply.

Don't worry, I won't be using this sermon to work in all my best (or worst) **jokes**. Thankfully there are **no jokes in the Bible**. Most jokes can only be enjoyed once and after that they become boring. But I will be inviting you to meditate with me on what the Bible tells us about the God who smiles and perhaps sometimes even laughs. I would like to summarise my findings in **three short points**, the third of which will lead us back to the Aaronic blessing.

1. God laughs at the foolishness of humankind.

With the help of a concordance I discovered that there is **only one** verse in the whole Bible in which we read that God **laughs**. The verse we heard in the reading from Psalm 2: I like words of the AV: "Why do the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing? The One enthroned in heaven laughs." This verse couldn't be more **fitting for situation** in our world today. Haven't we all asked this or a similar question in the last few weeks after seeing the news or reading the paper. Why are **nations warring** against each other without any concern for the loss of human life, for the suffering caused and for the thousands of refugees looking for shelter? Why are they **imagining vainly** that we can continue with our luxurious **lifestyle** at the cost of the future of our planet. How can our leaders consider themselves to be **above the law**?

We are living in the middle of a **frightening scenario**, but rather than succumbing to anxiety about the future, we are encouraged by the Psalm to **change our perspective**. Comforts us with the knowledge that there is a **greater power** at work. God who holds the whole world in his hand is not frightened, but **laughs** at the foolishness he sees. Not that he doesn't take it seriously, in fact we even read of his anger. Perhaps it would do us good sometimes to see the **world through his eyes** and join in the laughter and let ourselves **not be governed by fear**, but by a joyful hope - working together with God for future he has promised. In the knowledge that the arrogant puffed up politicians that we get so angry about will not have the **last word**.

2. God has the last laugh

We know the saying that they that laugh last laugh the longest. The God who has the last laugh is most clearly seen in the events that form the central core of our Christian faith. In the **crucifixion and resurrection** of Jesus. When we read these accounts in the Gospels it becomes very clear that God takes our suffering **seriously**. Takes it so seriously that he becomes human in the person of Jesus. Jesus shows **through his life and words** how loving God is. He preaches about a kingdom of righteousness and peace and about a life that goes on beyond the grave. But the **power hungry leaders** of church and state in his day felt **threatened** by his ministry and had him arrested. He undergoes the pain of **torture** and one of the most horrific forms of **execution** imaginable.

From the perspective of the Roman authorities and Jewish leaders the **problem is solved**. Jesus is dead. They must have felt **smug** and self-satisfied, totally unaware of the final joke or Pointe still to come. Mike Riddell describes this in his book “Godzone”:

It had all been so easy in the end. Jesus lay safely buried in a stone vault, his followers scattered, his dream hammered flat. But the third day began with a chuckle as the sun climbed over the world's edge. The trees trembled and shook as they caught on. A great belly laugh thundered from the earth to the sky, booming through the heavens. The tomb was empty, death was empty, Jesus was alive. And God had the last laugh.

Not a **quirky description** by a trendy modern theologian. Long tradition of **Easter laughter** in Christian church, particularly in Orthodox tradition. Belief that because of the resurrection God can **look down with compassion** on his Creation and **smile**, knowing in the end “All will be well and all manner of things shall be well”.

3. A smile on the face of God.

Which brings us back to the blessing from the book of **Numbers**. Let's look at the **words** of the blessing more closely. The Lord bless and keep you sounds a little **vague and abstract** in English, but

when we discover the original meaning of the **Hebrew** words we notice that they are connected with very specific visual images. **Barak**, to bless, was understood as showing somebody respect, kneeling down in front of them and offering gifts. What a **surprising** picture! The holy all-powerful God, the God who told Moses not to come closer because he was on holy ground – this same God blesses us, kneels before us and shows us respect.

May the Lord **keep you**. The word for keep is connected with a protective fence, built around sheep or cattle to keep out danger. In English the word keep was used for the main tower in the middle of a medieval castle. In other words, God provides us with a **safe place**. A space in which we can live our lives, but one which is protected from danger.

Make his **face shine** upon you. Not a remote God, out of touch with his creation, but a **God who looks at us** individually and lovingly, radiating his light towards us. This light makes everything **transparent** and shows us **as we really are**. Our strong points and weak points. Things we like other people to see and things that we would sooner **hide** and keep to ourselves. But this God is **gracious** towards us. He sees the **whole picture**, the good and the bad, the attractive and less attractive, and he **doesn't turn away**, but continues to smile lovingly.

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Let's take time at the end of this sermon to **let these words sink** into our being and sense their **healing** quality. If you like you can shut your eyes and spend a few moments **meditating** upon them. We can start by **thinking of a person** you know and respect, or a person that is close to you that you love. Imagine him or her turning his face toward you and smiling. Perhaps you're already getting a sense of what that feels like. Something in you **relaxes** or begins to open up.

Now imagine that **God is turning his face** towards you and feel the light of his countenance. Let this light spread out within you. Perhaps you'd like to let this light reach a part of you that you normally keep hidden. Remember that God is still smiling and perhaps you can begin to smile at it too.

Silence.

Mother Teresa had sense of humour. Was being interviewed by a reporter in Calcutta and was asked if she had one piece of advice as to how we should live as Christians. The reporter thought she would say we should sell all we have and live with the poor. Instead she replied "**Try smiling** at the people you live with!" The reporter protested that if she knew some of the people he lived and work with she would realize that it's not so easy. She answered: I live with Jesus and he can be very difficult sometimes!

So in the days to come let us remember that in spite of the state of the world and in spite of our own personal suffering God has the last laugh. And let his smile spread out within us. And **pass it on** to the people we encounter day by day.