

St Georges Zoom
Sunday 3 October 2021

THE BLESSING AOTEAROA (Numbers 6: 22-24)

Just occasionally we get hints of another world, a glimpse beyond the gossamer thin veil that currently separates heaven from earth. It's as if for a moment the music of heaven bursts through. It's as if the songwriter has been given a special glimpse into heaven itself. Often as not, the resulting song is composed at breathtaking speed, almost as if the musician is just an intermediary between heaven and earth.

Karen and I visited the British museum many years ago where they have an original score of *the Messiah* with Handel's notations. It's extraordinary - the words, music bursting off the page at an ecstatic pace. It's as if Handel was struggling to keep up with the music that was pouring forth. Newton's *Amazing Grace* composed one December evening. George Mathieson's *Love that will not let me Go* composed the evening of his sister's wedding are two other examples.

I am about to introduce you to another example.

On 27 February 2020 a group of musicians gathered together to write worship songs for the upcoming Sunday's church service, just two days away. They struggled for 8 hours to come up with something special and then it suddenly came together "as if something came into the room." They debuted their new song 48 hours later in a church service in North Carolina. You can see that recording on YouTube – the musicians are overcome, the congregation are overcome and there is a palpable sense that something very special has just occurred and that the Lord is very pleased indeed.

Of course I am talking about *The Blessing* – composed by husband and wife team Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes who form part of Elevation Worship.

Three things happened, almost immediately, that no one could ever have been anticipated:

- Three weeks after the song debuted in a local church service before it appeared on an album, was played on Christian radio was marketed and publicized, most of the world plunged into lockdown. Churches closed their doors, fear ran rampant and politicians in many parts of the world dithered. We all sensed our world was changing but we did not know by how much. We did not know if we this would be a short lived event or would rival the pandemics of old that killed millions. Might death even come knocking at our door? *The Blessing* was a song for our times – as COVID swept the planet;
- Secondly, without any marketing or publicity the song seemed to follow COVID and swept the globe. A few days after lockdown a group in Philadelphia made their own digital recording from their various bedrooms. A few days later 65 churches in the UK came together, again from their bedrooms and released their version on 3 May. The recording included the comment that while our church doors might be closed the church is very much alive. There are now over 145 digitally stitched together recordings, everywhere from Australia to Zimbabwe in multiple languages delivered from multiple bedrooms;
- Like the truly great hymns of the church, the song transcended the boundary lines of race, theology and geography that so beset the global church – a rare glimpse of the whole body of Christ in all her brilliance and radiance.

The song has gone on to garner all sorts of awards, covered by musicians throughout the world including Justin Bieber and ...

Which brings us to Aotearoa New Zealand.

I heard rumours of something happening in NZ, but it died down. I put it down to the challenges of assembling musicians during a lockdown. Then I heard it was on again – but like surfing – I thought we had missed the wave.

Well in fact it took a Kenyan Bishop and an Australian musician to rouse us kiwis. Prompted by Bishop Steve Maina from Nelson, Grant Norsworthy, who spoke at St George's recently, the call went out and kiwi Christians from all over Aotearoa sent in samples.

Friends of mine who work in media saw an early cut of it. They shook their heads in horror and said it would never work. They gave some half hearted advice on how to improve it but never expected the advice to be taken.

So I ignored the link that came through on my computer on 20 August with the NZ version – I was expecting to be underwhelmed and feared the cultural cringe moment. But a few days later, distracted, sick of zooms and emails I clicked on the link.

And something happened to me – I started to cry – not something I do very often at all.

It turns out I am not alone

- The haunting opening karakia, the sweeping shots of Aotearoa
- Over 200 performers
- Recognizing so many faces – Josh in Cornwall Park, David Lyle Morris on Waiheke, Nathan King looking as cool as ever, a couple of bishops
- A staff member
- The Salvation Army band

- The four big Pacifica boys – man can they sing
- The Mum holding her baby
- The cool singers
- The fat singers
- The just got out of bed singers
- The professionals, the amateurs
- Friends who were yet to face terrible tragedy in the coming months

I love the way it weaves te reo Maori and English together – more so because if we are honest the church has not always been a blessing for Maori.

It gave me a glimpse into the shape, variety and colour of modern Christianity in Aotearoa, NZ - intoxicating and so compelling. I was deeply moved as I am every single time I listen to the recording. It's a glimpse into what heaven will be like.

Theology of Blessing

*The Lord Bless you and Keep You
The Lord make his face shine upon you
And be gracious to you
The Lord lift up his countenance on you
And give you peace*

We are about to see those few lines pack in a heck of a lot of theology:

The Blessing is from Numbers 6: 24- 26.

The Priests are being instructed on how they should proclaim God's blessing over Israel –

Ancient, ancient words – still form a part of our liturgies today and commonly known as the Aaronic blessing.

The Lord bless you – means to ask God’s favour on someone, to bestow goodness upon them

And keep you – Hebrew word means to protect or guard or watch over you (Psalm 121:7-8)

The Lord will keep you from harm – he will watch over your life the Lord will watch over your coming and your going both now and forevermore

May his face shine upon you – literally may his face light up when he sees you. May God smile at you – deep sense of affection and pleasure when he hears our prayers

May he be gracious to you – this is the amazing grace that we spoke of a few weeks ago – that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Once lost, now we are found, once blind, now we see.

Turn his face towards you – I love this phrase. Zac as a kid – when he did not feel he had my full attention would place his hand on my cheek and gently pull it towards him so he could see my face and know he had my full attention. Reflect for a moment that right now God is giving you his full and complete attention – and you did not have to turn his cheek – he was already gazing at you.

And give you peace – notion of shalom- which means so much more than peace. It embraces health, safety, wholeness, prosperity and right relationships.

Blessing extending to the generations - extraordinary idea that the blessing stretches for generations

May his presence go before you - referencing the sentiments of Psalm 139 and

May his presence go before you

*And behind you and beside you
All around you, and within you
He is with you, he is with you*

He is with you. He is for you.

But it turns out we have only just got started! **But wait there's more!**

Most older hymns speak of God's character – faithful, gracious, powerful, mighty etc. More modern songs often speak of our love and devotion for God.

But as the biblical text makes clear the words of the blessing have no human author. They were not penned by a prophet, or a psalmist, or songwriter. God penned the lyric and when God instructed the priests to say these words over the people he was making it very clear they were just his mouthpiece – this was not their blessing but his.

The Blessing stands out because it is as if the Lord is singing to each one of us, in the quiet of our day. It's almost as if the Lord is sitting at the ends of our beds as day breaks or night falls and is quietly singing us

*I will bless you and keep you
I will make my face shine upon you and give you peace
And I will bless your children and their children.
For I am with you
And I am for you.*

He is for you – even when we are not for ourselves.

Conclusion

Yes *The Blessing* is a powerful witness of 1000's of people gathering across nations to sing beyond the walls of the church. The Blessing is a celebration of the incredibly diverse world wide community of believers who call themselves followers of Jesus. The blessing is taste of heaven.

But the blessing is so much more than that. Why am I so moved every time I see and hear the blessing? It's because God himself is pronouncing a blessing on my life and the life of those I love. This is no sentimental 'oh bless' that we might casually say to a friend. This blessing is coming from God himself and only he can fulfil it.

No matter what you do or feel or say – you cannot shake him off He is with you whether you profess to be a follower of Christ or not He is the invisible friend who is incredibly real.

He is for us in the morning, in the evening, in our coming and our going
He is for us in our weeping and our rejoicing

Just occasionally I wonder why I am still a Christian, particularly in the face of such seemingly overwhelming evidence that God has left the building:

- Crisis in Afghanistan
- Silence of God in the face of suffering
- The looming environmental catastrophe which is climate change

I could answer by saying I haven't managed to think of anything better. I could say that I have invested so much in this gig it's too late to pull out now. But that would be flippant and disingenuous

Why am I still a Christian? It's because of a deep sense of God's presence and blessing in my own life.

I believe, passionately in a God who is with me.
I believe in a God who is for me.
I believe in a God who weeps for me
I believe in a God who laughs with me
I believe in a God who blesses me
I believe in a God who is for each and every one of us

That even when sometimes I feel like letting him go - He will never let me go.

*I will bless you and keep you
I will make my face shine upon you and give you peace
And I will bless your children and their children.
For I am for you...always.*