



Rhythms of grace

In the ebb and flow of liturgy, God is at work, whether we hear him or not.



by
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Changed—from the inside out

Church has finished.

The final blessing has been spoken and now (after the inevitable announcements and perhaps a cup of tea) God's own assembly of sinner-saints will disperse and return to their everyday lives. So what has changed? How is this local Christian gathering any different from what it was before? Will the world be a different place because of the liturgical activities that have just unfolded?

Actually, it's very easy to slip back into the untransformed 'pattern of this world' as if nothing at all has happened. Without realising it, we can return to the world as if it's an opponent to be overcome, godless and unblessed. Life operates at a deficit, we reckon. And that means the basic task in life is to accumulate, to make up for our lack of blessing. Although with a bit of prayer and pleading, maybe God can help us turn the books around.

The conclusion of the service, however, prepares us for a different outlook. The word 'benediction' means 'to speak well' and that's exactly what has been happening throughout the entire liturgy. God has been speaking his good word to us all along: in the absolution, in the gospel proclaimed, in the 'for you' of holy communion. And now all these good words are bundled up into the final blessing: 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with favour and give you peace'.

But such blessing does not simply equate to more fortune, better

health, or greater personal success. God is not promising more of the old, for what point would there be in getting more if we ourselves remained the same? Instead, God's blessing changes **us**, from the inside out, enabling us to recognise and receive the gifts that are already ours. Blessed in this way, life becomes increasingly transparent to God's presence and activity in all things, any situation, and every person. Strange as it may seem, even our trouble and pain can become conduits for God's blessing. Just as the curse of 'Why have you forsaken me?' led to the blessing of 'He is risen!' so today, God's blessing encompasses both darkness and light, grief and joy. Indeed, Christ's life, death, and resurrection is the pattern that ultimately defines what 'blessing' means for us.

And this blessing is not just spoken over us. God speaks his good word to all creation, just as it was in the beginning. But in the coming week it will now be spoken **through** you. God's fundamental 'Yes!' to existence, his opposition to evil, his cancellation of debts, his gentleness with the struggling and patience with the fallen ... all that and more is contained in the good word of blessing which **we** now carry into the world. For in learning to receive God's blessing, we aim to become God's 'good word' for all we meet. And we dare to hope that this will indeed make the world a different place!

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