

Blessed are you

My colleague undergoes aggressive chemotherapy to treat advanced cancer. Even so, he counts every blessing along the way: an excellent doctor, an early medical appointment, a family member to drive him home from hospital, a friend's supportive phone message... His aura of gratitude is real and captivating, and I find myself revisiting a core belief: the power of blessing. My colleague, a Catholic, lives in Jerusalem and is imbued with an appreciation of Judaism. How fitting that we begin this reflection with inspiration from Jewish tradition.

Blessings are integral to Jewish religious consciousness. They are brief prayers, usually starting with the phrase "Blessed are you, Lord" and acknowledging God as sovereign of the universe. Blessings are prayed not only in synagogue or on special occasions, but in every event of life. There are blessings for eating, drinking, waking up, putting on new clothes, seeing a rainbow, lighting candles.... You name it, the Jews have a blessing for it!

To address God with "Blessed are you..." may cause some to wonder: how can a mere human bless Almighty God? In Judaism to bless God is to praise and thank God, to acknowledge God as source of every gift and blessing. Says the Talmud: "If you enjoy something in this world without saying a blessing, it is as if you stole it." (Talmud Berachot 35a)

The word 'blessing' (*barakha* in Hebrew), is related to the Hebrew word for knee (*berekh*). We can make a connection between the act of blessing and the inward disposition of kneeling in gratitude before the bounty and generosity of God.

As Christians, our Jewish faith-heritage, our biblical foundations and our own tradition call us to be a people who generously and readily bless; a people quick to notice and announce the wonderful truth about our lives. Scripture tells us that God declares creation 'good'. Jesus proclaims News that is 'Good'. The Holy Spirit empowers people with every measure of good gifts. When we allow ourselves, as a matter of course, to be caught up in this fascination for all that is 'good', we are already participating in the Divine Life. When we develop powerful antennae for lifegiving signs, we are already engaging with the Good News. And that's before we 'do' anything explicitly 'religious'!

Why then, do so many of us have an instinct for bad news?! Why do we so zealously defend our right to criticize, to point out what's wrong, to discuss others' faults, to predict disaster? It's always constructive criticism, we insist. If only we would mount the same passionate defense of our responsibility to praise the qualities, the strengths, the best efforts and the successes of those around us!

How beautifully God-like is a person in the act of praise! That person is expressive of the

divine image in which he or she was created. When I look back, I see that those who have most positively impacted my life have all been people with the capacity to 'bless' others with their encouragement and affirmation.

Doxology ("Glory be to the Father...Son...Spirit...") is central to Christian worship. Our fundamental stance before God is not one of repentance or petition, but one of praise. We stand in holy awe; enthralled and uplifted by the realization of God's love. We stand in thanksgiving, amazed that we are drawn into such a glorious Love Affair. Even in the face of suffering this stance is possible, as my colleague quietly attests as he attends his next chemo session. •

