

# 11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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*Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler*

## READ: PSALM 67

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"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us."

## REFLECT:

Last week I listened to lovely interview with Dr Ari Johnson, whose work to improve early access to healthcare in Mali has dramatically decreased infant mortality rates there.

I was completely enchanted by the way he described the people and culture of Mali, and particularly the prevalence of blessing in everyday speech. He said that Mali is a predominantly Muslim culture, ecumenical and warm, and that Muslims of all sects and Christians of all denominations "bless each other in the same language." Blessing takes place in almost every interaction, whether with the members of your family, the stranger you pass in the street or the woman who's selling you tomatoes. And the blessings are comprehensive: "may you have a

day of overflowing peace," "may you have a long and healthy life," "may your children have enough food," "may you achieve what you're seeking."

The language of blessing is prevalent in the Psalm set for this Sunday too. It begins with a reference to the famous words God gives to Moses to give to Aaron in Numbers 6:24-26. And it continues by asserting that God has (or shall? Both translations are possible) blessed the people, with blessings that extend to the ends of the earth.

Blessing is, perhaps, a "lost art" in our culture. With the exception of the automatic, thoughtless "bless you" when someone sneezes, we don't often bless one another, or speak of having been blessed. Perhaps it's because we live under an illusion of control. We believe that good things come from our own effort and achievement, rather than a generous God or any structures of kindness in the universe. Perhaps we even dismiss blessing as language of superstition.

I know of a church in Denver, a city where (like Oxford) there are lots of cyclists, that holds an annual "blessing of the bicycles" service. And I think there is much to be said for being liberal with our blessings. Blessing asserts that God is the source of all goodness. It cultivates gratitude, and helps us see through eyes of love. It rejects a false distinction between sacred and secular. John O'Donohue, in his beautiful book of Blessings *Benedictus* writes: "Despite all the darkness, human hope is based on the instinct that at the deepest level of reality some intimate kindness holds sway. This is the heart of blessing."

May God bless you in these dark, uncertain times.

## CONNECT:

Perhaps it's so alien to our culture that we're never going to be able to weave blessings into our natural speech without sounding like characters from *The Handmaid's Tale*! But this week I challenge you to find ways to bless, to give thanks for God's blessings, and to consider the ways our churches might bless our communities.

## PRAY:

*The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

- Numbers 6:24-26

*May the road rise to meet you.*

*May the wind be always at your back.*

*May the sun shine warm upon your face, the rains fall soft upon your fields and, until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand.*

- An Irish Blessing



## RESOURCES:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:  
[www.wheatleyurc.org.uk](http://www.wheatleyurc.org.uk)