

The Holy Trinity

Num 6:22-27

Rom 5:1-5

John 16:12-15

In each line of the Aaronic benediction the first part invokes God's personal act upon his people while the last part of each line states the reality or content of the blessing invoked. To put it differently: the first clause of each line states God's movement toward the people, the second clause, his activity in their behalf. The fact that the pronoun "you" is singular in Hebrew connotes the intimate and personal character of the relationship between the Lord and the recipients of the blessing, and it reminds us that we receive the blessing as one, as a community.

The text of the benediction emphasizes Yahweh as the source of all blessing, His name, and not the power of the priest or pastor, is part of his continuing, loving response to the prayers of the people. Blessing includes all of God's good gifts: posterity, possessions and wealth, land, fertility, health and victory. The content of this inclusive benefaction is his keeping, his protection from whatever difficulties, misfortunes, or enemies the worshipers may encounter. As the words about God's keeping are recited, we are reminded that he is the source of protection and assistance, and we clearly affirm that, as Lord of the world, God is the one who rules and controls the lives of those who stand under his care.

God's shining face is a sign of his friendly and well-wishing nearness. When God turns to us in deliverance it is in order that he may be gracious, usually in the bestowal of redemption from enemies, evil and sin. This second line as a whole is a prayer to Yahweh to turn in favor of his people and deal with them in their ongoing life out of his great mercy and grace, forgiving sins, delivering them from all affliction.

In the final line, the Aaronic benediction offers us peace. The emphasis here is on the material character of one's welfare. It can indicate not only cessation of conflict but bodily health. For the individual and the community alike the peace of God means safety and contentment.

The relationship between blessing and salvation has been well described by Claus Westermann: "Beside the polar works of saving and judging, the Old Testament knows a wholly different kind of divine acting in history: a constant acting not manifested in momentary events, namely God's work of blessing. Blessing really means the power of fertility. God's blessing causes a developing and growing, a ripening and fruit-bearing, silent advance of the power of life in all realms."

The principal emphases in the Aaronic benediction are as follows: the continuing presence and help of God; the protection and care which God provides through all situations, that is, his never-ceasing keeping of people in the presence of trouble and foes; the grace and mercy of God in dealing with the community and its members in their weaknesses and failures and afflictions; and the wholeness, help, prosperity, and peace which all seek. The blessing of God is broad and comprehensive, but not

vague nor even primarily spiritual. It is concrete and related to the world.

The emphasis on providence in all talk of God's blessing has been put in new light by Albert Cutler: "It is tempting, of course, to find the signs of special providence in history in its odd turns and `accidents' — or to look for it in the gaps that dot the historian's story. But if God is anywhere at all, it must surely be in his provision for the whole: in continuity and discontinuity, in the routine and the extraordinary, in the systolic-diastolic rhythms of crisis and perdurance."

Too strong an emphasis on God's mighty acts may tend to restrict him to the boundaries, to the gaps, to extraordinary events rather than to hail him at the center of ongoing life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw this correctly, when shortly before his death he wrote: "I should like to speak of God, not on the borders of life, but at its center, not in weakness but in strength, not therefore in man's suffering and death, but in his life and prosperity."

The Aaronic benediction is associated with Trinity Sunday, perhaps, because of the threefold character of its blessing. But equally worthwhile for Christian preaching is another facet of this Sun-day's character: a day when we meditate on the grandeur, majesty and goodness of God in general. The Aaronic benediction, with its repeated emphasis on Yahweh, known now to us in Jesus Christ, as the sole source of blessing and, therefore, the sole object of our devotion, may lend new dignity and meaning to this great feast. Yahweh, Jesus — yes, the Triune God — is known and valued not only for what he has done "for our salvation," but also and always for the daily acts of keeping, graciousness and peace in which he continues to act on our behalf in daily life.

Ralph W. Klein

Seminex

(The thoughts for this study are drawn in large part from the excellent article by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "The Blessing of God." *Interpretation* 29 (1975), 240-251.