

Ps 61:1,3
 Ps 24:3,5
 Ps 31:12,13,14,15
 Ps 63:3
 Ps 84:3,6
 Luke 24:50-53
 Lev 9:7-24
 Heb 7:11-8:2
 Luke 24:51

Yarrow, June 21, 2009

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Forty days after His resurrection on Easter Sunday, the Lord led His followers out of Jerusalem toward Bethany. It was, humanly speaking, no group to boast about. There were the eleven disciples, and maybe the women who had accompanied Jesus so faithfully, and maybe some others as well. Certainly no more than 120 persons – the crowd assembled on the day of Pentecost. Fishermen, tax collectors, women: all people whom society considered persons of no account.... A maximum of 120 persons; a truly disappointing, unsatisfactory fruit for three years' hard labour.... This, beloved, was the church being gathered by the Lord....

Behold, over this rag-tag group the Lord of Easter lifts up His hands! And listen: from His resurrected mouth proceed words of blessing for this small crowd of fishermen, women, tax collectors! And “while He was blessing them” –with His hands, then, stretched out still!– He rose from the earth, “left them and was taken up into heaven” (vs 51).

Why, congregation, did Jesus lift His hands in blessing? Was He playing games here with that little group of society's outcasts? Or must we see here a connection with that gesture of blessing-through-lifted-hands we see so often at the end of the worship service?

We're used to the worship service – and think that the essential element is the preaching, the sermon. That may be so. But the last word we hear from God before we go home is the blessing, uttered under uplifted hands. It's the blessing described in our text.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

CALVARY'S HIGHPRIEST LAYS AN UNENDING BLESSING ON HIS CHURCH.

1. the priest's blessing of the Old Testament era
2. Jesus' blessing at His ascension
3. the minister's blessing in the New Testament era

1. The Priest's Blessing

There stands Jesus, with arms outstretched in blessing. We're used to the thought. But make no mistake: for the men and women gathered around Jesus this was most amazing! For they surely knew their Bibles, and so will have known very well that God had reserved the gesture of lifting one's hands to lay a blessing on the people *for the priest* – and Jesus was not from the priestly tribe of Levi! How, then, was it possible for Jesus to raise His hands in blessing?

We read the passage from Leviticus 9. The passage relates the first time where Scripture mentions lifting up the hands in order to bless – and presents Aaron the priest as performing the gesture (vs 22). Deuteronomy 21 specifies in so many words that God Himself had chosen the priests “to minister to Him and to bless in the name of the Lord” (vs 5; cf I Chron 23:13). The

Lord had also specified what the priest had to say when he “blessed in the name of the Lord”; he had to speak those well-known words of Num 6¹:

“The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD turn His face toward you,
And give you peace.”

Certainly, the Old Testament Scriptures tell us of persons other than priests who blessed the people. David, when he brought the ark into Jerusalem, “blessed the people in the name of the Lord” (II Sam 6:18). So did Solomon when he dedicated the temple he built for the Lord in Jerusalem (I K 8:14,55). But nowhere do we read that David or Solomon or any non-priest lifted his hands in the gesture of blessing, and nowhere do we read either that any non-priest laid *the* blessing on the people. To do so was, by God’s ordinance, the task of the *priest*.

And what, according to Scripture, was the *significance* of the giving of the blessing through uplifted hands? Leviticus 9—remember, that’s the first occasion where the priest lifted his hands in blessing—presents for us Aaron carrying out for the first time his priestly duties in the new tabernacle. He presented to the Lord a sin offering for himself (vs 8) and a sin offering for the people (vs 15), as well as a burnt offering for himself (vs 12) and for the people (vs 16). There was also a grain offering and a peace offering for the people (vs 18). When these sacrifices had been presented to the Lord, *then*—vs 22—“Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them.” The context of this act of blessing is important if we are to understand the significance of that blessing.

What was the message of the sacrifices? This: by the sin offering which Aaron presented on behalf of the people, the people acknowledged before God that their wages from God on account of their sin-filled deeds was death. When the sin offering was made, Aaron, on behalf of the people, had to “lay his hand” on the head of the bull (Lev 4:4). That gesture symbolized that the sins of the people were transferred from the people to the bull. Then the bull, laden with the sins of the people, was killed as symbol of what *ought* to happen to the people, was killed *instead* of the people. With the sin offering dead, the people could know themselves free of sin; their sins had been transferred to the animal that died in their place. Once this sin offering was sacrificed, burnt offerings and peace offerings could be made to express the gratitude of the people for God’s atoning work, to express also the harmony and reconciliation there was again between holy God in heaven and this sinful people with whom He had established His covenant of grace.

Now, when those sacrifices had been made for the first time in the new tabernacle in Leviticus 9, *then* it was that Aaron lifted his hands toward the people to bless them. What is the significance, then, of this blessing? This: as the laying on of hands onto the bull symbolized the transfer of sin from the people to the bull, so the laying on of hands over the people symbolized the transfer of God’s blessing onto the people. That’s to say: the laying on of hands in blessing by the priest spelled out to the people that God in heaven *accepted* their sacrifices for sin, considered their sins gone, and so God was kindly disposed toward His people; there was for them blessing from God instead of curse.²

It’s to be fixed in our minds, congregation: this priestly blessing by the laying on of hands represents the *climax*, the *goal* of the sacrificial ceremony in the tabernacle.³ These sacrifices were daily to be presented to the Lord *for a distinct purpose*, and the purpose was daily again to reconcile the people to God, to rid the people daily of the cursed damnation that sin demands, and so to impress on the people day by day that God in heaven is their loving and

¹ The command to speak these words was addressed to “Aaron and his sons” (vs 23). The act is described with these words: “So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them” (vs 27).

² Cf Gispen, *Leviticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1950), pg 159.

³ See John Hartley, *Leviticus* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), pg 124.

caring and gracious covenant Father for the sake of the coming Christ. And precisely the good news that *reconciliation was granted* is spelled out by gesture of blessing-through-the-laying-on-of-hands.

That this gospel of reconciliation is in fact spelled out by the laying on of hands is demonstrated by the words which God commanded Aaron and the priests after him to utter in giving the blessing. Said the priest on God's command:

“The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD turn His face toward you,
And give you peace.”

“The Lord ... keep you,” the priest has to say, and the point of the word ‘keep’ is that the God with whom these sinners are reconciled would exercise great care over His redeemed people.⁴ To say it in words so familiar to us: here's the promise of Lord's Day 1 that God would preserve His own “in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.”

There's a promise too that the Lord would “make His face shine upon you.” The face, we know, expresses the disposition, the frame-of-mind one has toward another. The face can show anger, can also show mercy. God would make His face to “shine upon you”. That's to say, then, that holy God –He can tolerate no sin!– would show from heaven to His people Israel a disposition of grace and mercy and favour, and not one of anger. In fact, the Lord would, as it were, look His people in the eye, accept them in grace, and so shower on them peace.⁵ Here's His divine smile!

We understand: the blessing, the gesture that comes with it, was for Israel so very rich in gospel! That priestly gesture of blessing assured the people of the peace of God, guaranteed to them that Paradise was restored, that sinners could live with God and God with men – Immanuel! That blessing: it was calculated to fill the people with joy and praise; their sins were forgiven, they were reconciled to God! No wonder that the pious in Israel delighted in the blessing day after day after day....

2. *Jesus' Blessing*

Now there's Jesus – He lifts His hands in blessing! The disciples around Jesus knew their Bibles, knew the enormous wealth embodied in the gesture of the blessing. What gospel, then, would their dear Lord and Master lay on them!

But: is Jesus' act not sacrilege? God had specified that the *priests* were to give the blessing. But Jesus is not of the tribe of Levi; Jesus is of the tribe of Judah, and therefore not a priest. The disciples knew their Bibles, knew what happened to King Uzziah when he thought to assume the function of the priest; God struck him with leprosy (II Chron 26:16ff). Was Jesus, then, allowed to do this? Would God not strike Him down too??

No, God did not strike His Son down in anger for intruding into the office of the priest. Why not? Because this man was *the* Priest! The sacrifices of the Old Testament tabernacle called out, each in turn, for the coming of the Lamb of God as *the* sacrifice for sin. Jesus had said of Himself that He was the Lamb of God, and so, in obedience to God's will for Him, had gone to the cross of Calvary as sacrifice for sin. Yet Christ on the cross was not just sacrifice; He was also Priest. For He presented to the Father the sacrifice required by God's justice on account of our sins. As the one presenting Himself as the only atoning sacrifice, He *was* Priest, yea, Highpriest.

⁴ RK Harrison, *Numbers* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1990), pg 133.

⁵ TR Ashley, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pg 152.

Then it's true: He was not from the tribe of Levi, but instead from the tribe of Judah, "of which tribe" (the author of Hebrews 7 notes) "Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood" (vs 14). But the Lord had said something in His Old Testament revelation about a new Priest arising not after the order of Aaron (that is, of the tribe of Levi and hence priest by virtue of ancestry), but after the order of Melchizedek – that is, priest *despite* ancestry. And here was such a Priest: He presented to the Father the sacrifice demanded by our fall into sin. On the cross He presented Himself as the required payment, and after suffering the wrath of God He laid down His life..., and on the third day arose from the dead as the Victor. That resurrection was evidence that God in heaven was pleased with the sacrifice of His Son – and so the sins that had stood between God's people and God were taken away, gone!

And precisely there, congregation, is the reason why Jesus *was* in a position to lift His hands in blessing. Leviticus 9 presents Aaron the priest laying the blessing on the people directly *after* he had presented to God the required sacrifices for sin, and in that blessing assuring the people that now God's favour and peace was theirs; their sins were gone. Jesus, Luke records, has just finished his work on the cross (chap 23), and arisen from the dead and confronted His disbelieving disciples with the reality of His resurrection (chap 24:1-49). *Then* Luke presents Jesus as leading His own out of Jerusalem and lifting His hands over them in blessing. That is: Luke places this gesture of blessing *distinctly in the shadow of the cross of Calvary*. Sure, in actual fact the events of our text occur forty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead (we learn from elsewhere in Scripture), but Luke in His gospel makes no reference to the span of forty days; Luke in our text connects the blessing directly to the finished sacrifice on the cross. The Priest has completed His work, and so can apply to His church the result of that work; He can lift His hands in blessing and so assure His own that God in heaven will bless them and keep them, will make His face to shine on them and be gracious to them, will turn His face toward them (and not away from them) and give them peace.

How wonderfully rich, then, this event in the fields near Bethany must have been for the disciples with Jesus! Always that blessing from the priest is so rich in its meaning, but this time the wealth of the blessing is so much greater – since the great High Priest Himself, who actually satisfied the justice of God on account of our sins, lifts *His own hands* in divine blessing!

And we're to notice too, beloved, that the disciples were accustomed to seeing the priest lift his hands in blessing – and after some moments lower his hands again. That is: there was something imperfect, something incomplete in the action of the priest. The hands of blessing had to come down again, because through the animal sacrifices atonement was not made for sin once and for all; tomorrow sacrifices had to be offered for sin again. But on the cross of Calvary Jesus did pay for sin, *once for all* (Hebrews 9). So His hands of blessing could *remain raised*; they did not have to come down. And that's precisely what Luke tells us! While He was blessing them, while His hands were lifted in the gesture of laying the blessing of God on the people, Jesus "left them and was taken up into heaven." Note the passive: Jesus "was taken up." That's to say: God in heaven took Jesus up. While He stood there with His hands stretched out in blessing, God carried Him aloft. This is the last the disciples see of Him: *with hands uplifted in blessing*. That's how He leaves, that's the image the disciples retain in their minds: Jesus has His hands extended in blessing.

That means this: the content of the blessing remains valid throughout the New Testament dispensation! The great High Priest has ascended into heaven –to do what?– to ensure that there is grace from God and peace for the Church on earth bought with His blood! That's what the author of Hebrews writes: Christ the Priest-after-the-order-of-Melchizedek has ascended into heaven and so make possible that we can "draw near to God" (vs 19). Vs 25:

"Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

Since Christ the High Priest labours in heaven today through intercession for us to the Father, God does not hold our sins of today against us; instead the blessings of the covenant, the reconciliation Christ obtained by His sacrifice on the cross and therefore the grace and peace of God, are granted to the church of God throughout the ages. That is why the apostle Paul can address the churches to whom he writes with words of grace and peace to them from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 1:7; I Cor 1:3; II Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; etc). And Jesus can speak to the seven churches of Asia Minor also words of grace and peace (Rev 1:4f). Here is the wealth of Jesus' unending blessing extended to the church of the New Testament dispensation. More, this is why the letters of the Lord through Paul to His churches time and again *end* with reminders of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit being with all the saints; "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." (Rom 16:20; I Cor 16:23; II Cor 13:14; etc). *For Christ in heaven continues endlessly to lay His blessing on His church.*

3. The Minister's Blessing

And there, beloved in the Lord, is why the blessing is still laid upon the congregation by the minister after the service. That hands are lifted in blessing over the congregation is not a simple matter of tradition; it's rather a *proclamation* of the blessed results of the victory of Christ on the cross. With that gesture you are reminded that the great High Priest departed with hands uplifted in blessing, you are reminded that in heaven today this great High Priest intercedes for you still with the Father, and the Father for Jesus' sake is favourably disposed to you – though He knows your sins so well. Through that act of the minister you are assured that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit in fact is transferred to this congregation; you are reminded, you are told that you live under the umbrella of God's favour.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, do not –I urge you– do not see that moment at the end of the service as meaningless tradition, and do not see it either as a time to collect your gear to get ready to leave. See it instead as the climax of the whole service; all that's gone before prepares for this glorious moment: the ascended Christ, through the mouth of His minister, lays upon His church His *definite and certain blessing*. That blessing is not prayer or a wish of which we're not sure whether or not we receive it; it's a definite and certain blessing guaranteed for the church of the ascended Saviour.

Open your heart, then, Sunday by Sunday, to receive that glorious blessing. Then go, go home in peace, assured that the Lord blesses *you* and keeps *you* in the coming week, that the God of heaven and earth makes His holy face to shine on *you*, is favourably disposed to *you*, knows no condemnation for *you*, that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ gives His peace to *you*.