

NUMBERS 6:22-27
THE SMILING FACE OF GOD!

What does this face say? The woman looks grumpy at the very least. She's not happy with life, things are not well. She could have fallen out with you a moment ago and she's letting you know that she's not happy. You might have offended her, or perhaps got in her way; maybe you got to the parking space first and she's not happy. She could be angry with you, upset. Her face tells you that all is not well with her and it could be that your relationship with her is spoiled because of that; maybe it's your fault. Here's a very different face: a laughing man! His face tells a very different story: he's happy, he's laughing, everything is well with him and if this is part of your conversation with him, then you've made him smile and laugh and that's a good thing; it means that things are well; if he's happy then you can be happy too. These are two very different faces, telling two very different stories.

Faces do that. Our faces so often give away how we feel; by looking at someone's face, especially someone you know well, you can tell how they feel. Our faces tell when we're happy, or angry, or grumpy, or bored, or in pain or delighted, or confused – I can tell when you are confused! Sometimes it's just a fleeting instant that does it, a look in eyes that gives one message which, when we've composed ourselves, we try to give a very different message, yet that instant has given us away! Without trying, without realising it at times, our faces tell far more of a story than we know.

I've always been fascinated by the words we read from Numbers 6: the picture they paint of God is wonderful, refreshing, grace-giving; what is happening with these words is also a wonderful thing and we're going to enjoy all of that for the next few minutes. Aaron was Moses' brother and had been appointed the first priest in Israel; the priest had job of standing between God and the people and there were two sides to that relationship – first, he had to bring people's offerings to God, priest made their sacrifices on their behalf, and second he had to bless people with God's blessing. He had to speak to God for the people and he had to speak to the people for God. It is the second of these that we have in Numbers 6; Aaron blesses the people; he speaks to the people on God's behalf.

There are two ways in which Church still revels in these words and others like them. First of all, we sing them, mainly at baptisms; once the person is baptised we sing these words to them as way of wishing them God's blessing, as a sort of prayer for them, that God will bless them. The second way is at the end of the service as we use words like these, when the minister pronounces the benediction: not just *the way we end the service!* There is more to it than that and it is a reflection of what God does for His people in Numbers 6 through Aaron. We will come back to that later.

"The Lord..." (6:24ff) There are three lines, three pieces, in which God offers and promises so much, in which a picture of God is painted to lift up our spirits. As these lines get longer, so the richness of the blessing they offer gets deeper and stronger; The second part of each line shows us what the first part means. The blessing repeats 'the Lord' each time – we need to be clear about the source of the good things we need for life; every blessing comes from God; He is the source of grace and peace; all we need, the Lord gives to us.

"The Lord..." (v24) The word 'bless' is hard to pin down. What does it mean? It can mean all kinds of things, but when used of God it speaks of God offering and giving good things to His people. In general, God is promising to be good to His people; that is the kind of God He is and what these verses do is to spell that out in some quite powerful ways. So here, God promises to 'keep' His people – God will watch over His

people, be their protector, their guardian. Nothing happens to us, but God knows; nothing touches us but God knows; there are no circumstances of our lives, but that God has promised to be with us in them and through them. There is no promise in the Bible ever, as far as I can see, that God promises a charmed life, that His people will never face hard things; but there are lots of promises all through the Bible that God will be with us through hard things and in the midst of these will keep us, and protect us, and watch over us wherever we go, whatever our circumstances.

“The Lord...” (v25) Let’s go back to our faces at the beginning – how do we picture the face of God? Is it a smiling face or permanently grumpy? It is an angry face? Be clear, this is a picture, a visual aid, an idea of God in human terms to help people understand what God is like. The Old Testament people knew that could not look at God, they had to hide from Him, because He was too holy, but here is something else. God’s face shines on His people, He smiles on His people; this is the God who looks on His people with favour, who loves His people, who delights in His people. That’s what this smiling-face-of-God picture suggests to us.

God is gracious to bless us beyond anything we deserve; God looks on us with favour and love. We will never really understand grace till we see Jesus: *“Greater love...” (Jn 15:13)* We have not been very good friends to Jesus, we have let Him down, we have betrayed Him at times, we have wandered away from Him, our love for Him has been fickle. Yet He has still loved us and gone on loving us and has laid down His life for us. This is grace, love to people who don’t deserve it; this is God being gracious to us.

“The Lord...” (v26) There was a TV documentary a few years ago that showed how mother/child relationships developed. It started off with mother looking at her child, smiling and engaged with her child and how the child responded to that. Then the mother was told to turn her face away and not respond to the child at all – the child tried to interact with its mother, but how quickly the child stopped, and gave up because it sensed its mother’s disapproval. From being loved and accepted because the mother was turned towards child, to sensing a lack of love and acceptance as its mother turned her face away – it happened so quickly as to be quite scary! What message do we send out when we turn our backs on someone? A sense of rejection or disapproval?

God turns His face towards His people – a sign of love and approval; elsewhere, judgement is seen as God hiding His face from His people. Here God turns his face towards His people, God is listening, paying attention, blessing His people. As the Lord’s face is turned towards His people, the climax of this whole blessing is the word ‘peace’. ‘Shalom’ is the Hebrew word for peace and is a far bigger word than the word we use to translate it. Shalom is about everything, about the whole of life being right, a sense of well-being in every part of life, including a right relationship with God. This is “the sum total of all God’s good gifts to His people.” (Wenham) When God gives Shalom to His people, He has nothing left to give; everything is ours! No part of life is untouched, nothing is left out when God gives His peace; everything is ours!

The cynic might say that this is just wishful thinking, that of course, we want God to be like this and to give these good things, so by using these words, we are hoping for the best. That is not what Numbers says is happening when Aaron pronounces these words over the people of Israel. At the end of every service, we have the benediction, which just means speaking good words; is that just a good way to end service, again wishful thinking? No. *“So they...” (v27)* Aaron puts the name of the Lord on the Lord’s people. For us, names are just labels to separate you from me, to identify you from

me. But when the bible uses 'the name of Lord' it means the whole of the Lord's being, everything that the Lord is. So by putting the name of the Lord on His people, Aaron is bringing all that God is, everything these words convey about God, to be on the people, and to touch their lives.

I am not a priest; I claim no power to convey grace to anyone; only God gives grace by His Spirit. But, when I pronounce the benediction at the end of the service, this is more than just a full stop; this is more than just a nice way of ending the service. The form of words that we use is in some ways a prayer that God would be gracious to us as we leave, but these words are also more than that; they are putting the name of the Lord on the Lord's people so that grace will go with you as you leave this place and grace will be with you wherever you go till you come back here again. 'Amen' is again more than just the last word; 'Amen' is the people's word, saying 'yes' to these words, saying 'yes, we want these blessings from God; yes, we want, indeed we need, His grace and peace; let it be to me as you say!'

A favourite TV programme of mine when it was on was *Grumpy Old Men*. Perhaps that's because so many of attitudes they expressed I found that I shared! These were people who always had something to complain about; they were almost permanently disapproving of so many attitudes and so much behaviour that prevails in our society. Is that how we picture God? As a grumpy old man? Always with a scowl on His face, permanently disapproving of us because of the mistakes we make, the faults we have, our failings, because our love is fickle? That He is always complaining that things are not what they once were; not what they should be; that He is always reminding of what we've done wrong and of the good we've neglected? Is that our picture of God? Is that what we think God's face is like?

Here's a different picture. God is watching over us, our protector. God's face has a smile of approval and grace and love for us. God's face is turned towards us in acceptance, listening to our prayers, accepting us as we are. This is what God is like. This is our God. Jesus shows us God, He is the exact representation of His being; Jesus shows us grace; Jesus brings us wholeness of life, peace; the sum-total of the blessings of God are ours in Jesus. Some children feel that they need to win approval from their parents, and they never quite get there no matter how hard they try. God is not like that with His children: we have his approval, we have his acceptance, we have His love, grace and peace, forgiveness – all of these are ours already in Jesus. So the Father watches over us, smiles on us, turns His face to us. This is our God; blessed be the Name of the Lord!