

Fr Ronald Rolheiser OMI - Hungry for Blessing

A reflection on the significance of the words spoken by the Father at the baptism of Jesus

Several years ago, I preached a homily on the baptism of Christ within which I remarked that the words that God speaks over Jesus at his baptism: *“This is my beloved child in whom I take delight!”* are words that God daily speaks over us.

Some hours later my doorbell rang and I was approached by a young man who had heard my homily and who was both moved and distraught by it.

He had not been to church for some time but had gone on this particular Sunday because he had, just that week, pleaded guilty to a crime and was awaiting sentence. He was soon to go to prison.

The homily had struck a painful chord inside of him because, first of all, he had trouble believing that God or anyone else loved him; yet he wanted to believe it.

Secondly, and even more painful, he believed that nobody had ever been pleased or delighted with him: *“Father, I know that in my whole life nobody has ever been pleased with me. I was never good enough! Nobody has ever taken delight in anything I’ve ever done!”* This man had never been blessed. Small wonder he was about to go to prison.

What does it mean to be blessed? What is a blessing?

The word blessing takes its root in the latin verb: *Benedicere*, to speak well of (*Bene*—well; *dicere*—to speak). Therefore, to bless someone is, in the end, to speak well of him or her.

But this implies a special form of “speaking well.” To bless someone is, through some word, gesture or ritual, to make him or her aware of three things:

1. the goodness of the original creation where, after making the earth and humans, God said that it was “good, very good”;
2. that God experiences the same delight and pleasure in him or her. that he experienced with Jesus at his baptism when he said: “This is my beloved child in whom I take delight”; and
3. that we, who are giving the blessing, recognize that goodness and take that delight in him or her.

Thus, the ritual blessing that we are given at the end of a Eucharist: *“I bless you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”* could be paraphrased to sound like this: *“As we leave this celebration, let us feel deeply and take with us the deep truth that we, the world, and our lives are good, very good. There is no need to live in guilt and depression. We are, despite our faults, very good and delightful to God. Let us, therefore, take delight in each other and in ourselves. We are, after all, extremely pleasing to God.”*

When I left home as a 17-year-old boy, my father and mother blessed me. They had me kneel on the old linoleum floor of our kitchen, placed their hands on my head and said the ritual words of Christian blessing.

In effect, however, what they were saying to me was: *“We love you, we trust you, we are proud of you and we send you off with our full spirit. You are our beloved child and in you we are well-pleased.”*

I suspect that had the young man I spoke of above been blessed in the same way by his parents or by anyone else significant to him, he would not have been on his way to prison. To be unblessed is to be bleeding in a very deep place.

So much of our hunger is a hunger for blessing. So much of our aching is the ache to be blessed. So much of our sadness comes from the fact that nobody has ever taken delight and pleasure in us in a non-exploitive way.

When has anyone ever made you the object of delight? When has anyone taken, in a nonexploitive way, delight in your body, your beauty, your intelligence, your person? When have you last felt that you are someone in whom others, and God, take pleasure and delight?

Only a few, I suspect, move about in their daily lives with the joy, confidence and grace that comes from knowing that they are, as persons, good, beautiful and objects of delight. Depression is more the rule.

Most of us are more like the young man spoken of above—bleeding, less than whole, unconfident, depressed, going through life without a sense either of its goodness or of our own, going through life without being able to really give or experience delight.

Scripture says that when Jesus was baptized the Spirit came to him in bodily form and said: *“This is my beloved child; in him I take delight!”*

What we need, more than anything else, is to precisely give bodily form to this blessing. We need, daily, within our families and within our relationships in general, to do things and say things that help those around us believe that life is good, that their lives are good, that they are good and that we, and God, look on them with great pleasure and delight.