



The Benedicamus and The Benediction

The concluding elements of the Divine Service have deep Old Testament roots. In yet another salutation (*P*: “*The Lord be with you.*”) (*C*: ***And with thy spirit.***”), the pastor proclaims the presence of the Lord to bless, and the congregation replies that the pastor is there in Christ’s stead and with his spirit to carry out the Lord’s blessing of His people.

Then follows the Benedicamus, the pastor saying, “*Bless we the Lord,*” and the congregation response is: “***Thanks be to God.***” Each book of the Psalms concludes with, “*Blessed be the LORD...*” (cf. the end of Pss. 41, 72, 89, 106, and 150)! The Psalms is the worship book of the Old Testament. How fitting that our worship should conclude similarly!

The response, “***Thanks be to God,***” is a repetition of the same thought: that God is praised or blessed when we thank Him for what He has done for us. What has He gifted in the span of the last hour or so, in particular, when we sing these words? The phrases, “*Bless we the Lord*” and “***Thanks be to God,***” reflect in kernel form two chief modes of Israelite prayer, carried over into New Testament forms. Both are grounded in God’s saving acts, and praise Him for His mighty deliverance of His people. Read Eph. 4:3-14 for an extended example of “blessing the Lord,” and Eph. 4:15-23 for an extended example of “giving thanks to the Lord.” In the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus’ prayer is one of blessing (St. Matt 14:19) and in the feeding of the 4,000, of thanksgiving (St. Matt 15:36). So these forms have gone hand-in-hand from the beginning of the Church and in connection with the Supper of our Lord (St. Matt 26:26; 1 Cor. 11:24).

The Benediction follows the Lord’s instruction to the priests of Israel for putting His name upon His people (Num 6:22-27). By these words, those ordained to speak for God to His people put His name upon them—and the Lord says, “I will bless them.” What does the three-fold form of the benediction suggest about who God is (and was even in Old Testament, and from and to all eternity)? The use of the Aaronic benediction at the conclusion of the service is something of a Lutheran usage, being suggested by Luther in his revision of the Mass. The final blessing developed over time in various liturgies. Early on it seems the understanding was that receiving the Supper was blessing enough! These words, though, do not detract from, but unpack, that thought. When Jesus ascended into heaven, St. Luke writes that Jesus blessed them, and in the blessing, was parted from them (St. Luke 24:50-51). Luther speculated that He might have used words like these of old. To us they are meant to suggest the fullness of the blessing our Lord has given us in His Body and Blood and His presence with us in the Divine Service—for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. And where there is forgiveness of sins, surely there is also all life and salvation. Thanks be to God! Amen!

The Peace of the Lord be with you always,

Pastor Jeff Patterson †