

A Cashier's Blessing

We ate for the first time in a Mexican restaurant in San Marcos, Texas. Serving as cashier was a dignified Hispanic man who probably was the owner. As he handed me the change from my payment, he thanked me politely and, looking me in the eye, added, "God bless you."

Why would I still remember that after twenty years? Because it had not happened to me before nor has it happened since. It impressed on me a lesson that I am still having great difficulty in putting in practice. Why is it so hard for me to communicate some message of faith to strangers? It may be as simple as "God bless you," "Hasn't God given us a beautiful day," "God has blessed you in this way or that," or "If the Lord wills." Nothing preachy or overly pious. Just a recognition of God in our lives.

Letters that I receive from other countries and cultures invariably begin with something like: "Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." The letters in the Scriptures usually begin with some blessing of grace and peace in the name of Jesus. Disciples were urged to greet one another with a holy kiss. But these messages were addressed to those who were known to be fellow-believers. We are talking about strangers here.

I was never nurtured into that kind of expression. By nature I have had a crippling reticence and choking timidity that stifled my attempts at being so expressive. I abhorred any conspicuous display of piety. And there was the matter of possibly giving greeting to unworthy persons. Far be it from me to "bless" a stranger! He might be a reprobate, a pagan, non-religious, or even a Baptist! ☺ How could I have ever concluded that expressing good will in the name of God was giving blanket endorsement of all in the life of the person being addressed?

Making others conscious of God in their daily lives is certainly a positive. It will help the unbeliever to be aware that God is concerned with him. It may bring some degree of conviction to the person who is irreligious or evil. And the person who is a believer will be cheered to learn that you are one also.

Limiting my religious communication mostly to those I knew to be disciples fostered a feeling of loneliness as I moved among the general public. I isolated myself under Elijah's broom tree and hid in his cave. You know about "the Elijah complex." Elijah withdrew himself in defeat and self-pity, wailing, "I am the only one left, and they are after me!" God shook him into the consciousness that there were 7,000 who stood with him that he had failed to recognize (1 Kings 19)..

The king of Syria sent a great army which surrounded Elisha in Dothan in order to capture him. "When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went

out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was round about the city. And the servant said, 'Alas, my master! What shall we do?' He said, 'Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' Then Elisha prayed, and said, 'O Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see.'" (2 Kings 6). The servant then saw the Lord's host surrounding them. There may be many more standing with us than we realize. Let's open our eyes to see them.

Jesus impressed upon his disciples a lesson which I have been slow to comprehend. "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward'" (Mark 9:38-41). Instead of ignoring or criticizing expressions of faith by others, to say to them, "We are serving the same Christ" would be like giving a refreshing drink to the thirsty. Such identity is centered upon our sharing faith in Christ rather than approval of all the conduct and teachings of other believers.

In spite of the prevalent divisions and sectarian attitudes which mar the public image of Christ, if all believers were to consistently express confirmations of faith in non-sectarian terms to one another, that image would become much brighter. Then it could be said of us also, "...in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15).

Expressions should never become perfunctory lest they lose their meaning. In former times disciples would pronounce parting blessings such as "God be with you" (shortened into "goodbye"), "adieu" and "adios" (literally, "to God"). In time, these became so customary that they are used as parting words with no thought of reference to God. They lost their meaning.

Too much of the time I have gone about in the market place with a feeling of loneliness with little thought that others with whom I transacted business might be believers also. Just a word of confirmation from me might have made their day -- and mine too! Just like the cashier's "God bless you" did for me.

(Cecil Hook, July 2001) []