

Blessings & Curses

Blessings are a significant feature of our faith tradition.

We are invited to count our blessings.

We prize the unique blessings summed up in the Beatitudes.

And we receive a blessing at the end of every service of worship.

We even say "God bless you" when somebody sneezes.

By contrast, we may have given little thought to the equally significant tradition which is the opposite of blessing: the curse.

Today's reading from Isaiah, for instance, tells of the curse that comes upon the unfruitful vineyard, a symbol of the unfaithful Israelites.

Of course, blessing and curses are not restricted to biblical passages.

An overseas church personnel serving in West Timor, John Campbell-Nelson says that both blessing and curse are a living part of the cultural tradition there.

"We have often dealt with curses directed

against people who steal their neighbour's coconuts,

move the boundaries of their fields;

even curses directed by parents against their unruly kids.

However, little did we expect that we ourselves were the objects of a curse.

John explains: "It began with the unexpected death of the Timorese matriarch who had become like a grandmother to our children as they were growing up.

Shortly after, we became unwillingly embroiled in a series of internal conflicts

at both the church and the university where we worked.

Everything seemed to be going wrong all at once, and for a time,

it seemed that we would be unable to continue our work here.

Then, our adopted clan in the mountains of South Central Timor decided to do something.

In their interpretation, our problems stemmed from a vow

made by their ancestors not to allow foreigners to enter their territory.

After all the grief the Dutch gave them in colonial times,

followed by the Japanese occupation, their attitude was understandable.

They were concerned that these foreign powers that had invaded and dominated them would eventually steal their very identity as Timorese.

The problem is, the curse on dealings with foreigners had never been lifted.

For 20 years we had been coming to the village, spending Christmas and Easter together, our children growing up together--all flying in the face of an ancestral curse.

So members of our extended Timorese family and their community decided it was time to lift the curse.

We met at the edge of a stream that marks the boundary of the village,

they on one side and we on the other.

On their side, tree branches blocked the path and a string tied between two upright sticks.

There were a few rounds of antiphonal ritual speech back and forth across the stream, followed by a prayer from the local lay preacher.

Then a descendant of the king who had made the original curse

pulled aside the branches and cut the string.

We then crossed over into the welcoming arms of the village.
They cooked a pig on the spot and, according to tradition, we ate it all before leaving.
There could be no leftovers - a sign that the ancient problem was completely finished also.

As we ate in a circle on the bank of the stream,
John's life partner Karen looked around at the faces of these kind and generous people
and said, "This is communion."
That day the promise of World Communion Sunday became a reality for the two of them.

Our passage from 2 Corinthians refers to the ministry of reconciliation God entrusts to us.
As we join with Christians around the world in blessing and consecrating the loaf and cup,
May this meal at Christ's table strengthen us in addressing those things
that have brought a curse upon our world and estrangement between people.

What would you name as things that are accursed in our times?
What plagues our world today?

You remember the curse put on Sleeping Beauty.
Is that the primary curse plaguing so many nowadays?
A curse that puts us asleep, unable to see both the threats and joys of life in our times?
Where do old curses need to be lifted?
Where does the blessing of reconciliation need to be let loose?

May all who gather at the table in churches worldwide today
be blessed in a way that awakens them to faithful action. Amen.