It’s hard not to be stirred by the warmth of the words of blessing spoken in this morning’s first lesson from the book of Deuteronomy. This and other passages from Deuteronomy are often used at Harvest Thanksgivings. Their moving words rehearse the history of the Lord’s provision for his people, bringing them into a land abounding with the Lord’s gifts, a land, where they shall ‘eat [their] fill and bless the Lord…for the good land he has given’ (8:10), celebrating ‘with all the bounty that the Lord…has given to [them] and [their] house’ (26:11): ‘Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out’.

But there is a shadow to the light of this blessing, as becomes apparent in the second half of the reading we heard. The last eight verses of the reading summarise much of what has gone before in Deuteronomy: they gather in one compact account the blessings that the Lord will give to his people. But note that these blessings are to the Lord’s people, narrowly defined as the people of Israel; and these blessings come at the expense of others: ‘All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you’. There is a twist here, of course, in that the writer or writers of Deuteronomy were seeking to explain the consequences of the Jewish people’s failure to adhere to the laws of the Lord their God, a failure that the Deuteronomists saw as punished by the collapse of Judah in 586 BC and the Exile in Babylon. So the benedictions pronounced here set out a state of blessing that was more theoretical than actual: this, the Deuteronomists are saying, is what would have happened to you had you heeded the Lord’s teaching, had you been his people as he is your God. Nonetheless the point remains that the blessings described here are exclusive: they set the Jewish people apart.
There is a reverse image of this in this morning’s second lesson. Exasperated at the failure of his mission to his own people, the Jews, Paul cites the prophet Isaiah against them: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, / and you will indeed look, but never perceive’. Paul wipes the dust from the soles of his feet and turns from his own to the peoples of the Gentile world: ‘Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.’

The difficulties here are manifold. We know only too well how fraught has been the history of relationships here. Passages like these have been cited by Jews and Christians alike to justify all kinds of abomination. In the face of a history of persecution, exclusion and demonization, one of the most important tasks to which we are called is to learn again how to read our scriptures properly: not as an ammunition dump for assaults on the other side, but as resources to think again about what it means to be God’s people, to know his blessing and indeed to be deprived of it.

In both this morning’s readings we seem on the face of it to be playing a zero sum game here: one side wins, the other loses; one side is blessed, the other cursed.

‘All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you’. Israel shall be blessed; the other nations shall live in fear and trembling.

‘Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.’ Israel has declined to hear the words the other nations will heed.

The interesting thing, though, is that this is not how blessing works in the life and teaching of Jesus. Blessing, as Jesus practises it, is not a singling out of one over against another, but a particular instance of God’s saving will for all. As Andrew Davison has put it, blessing is ‘a sign of the redemption of all things, not the damnation of most’ (Blessing, p.23); blessing points to the way in which ‘life here and now relates to life in the world to come’ (p.84). Thus the Beatitudes, which lie at the very heart of Jesus’s teaching, deepen and broaden the sense of blessing: blessing here is not about prosperity, but about being drawn into union with God and God’s kingdom: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven…blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God… blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God…’. Blessing here does not set apart or over and against. Instead it places its recipients in a larger frame, the largest context of all, the love of God for all things.
In his great work, *The Christlike God*, Bishop John V. Taylor quoted a story-poem by Charles Williams. In it a 'gentleman of quality' is asked to the Prince Emmanuel’s ball, but is horrified when he learns that ‘fancy dress’ is required. The gentleman of quality’s motto is ‘I always strive to be myself’. So, though he refuses absolutely to dress up as anyone other than himself, because he is a friend of the Prince Emmanuel, he decides that an exception will be made for him. He duly arrives at the ball and tries to get in, but his way is barred by a footman. The footman has exquisite manners, indeed he is altogether exquisite, wearing dazzling livery and dropping shafts of light. It becomes clear that this footman is in fact an angel and that the gentleman of quality has come to the gate of heaven. With no fancy dress, he is denied admission. Instead, the angel stands aside and lets him glimpse the hall where everyone is indeed in dress other than their own. Charles Williams’ poem, an excerpt from which you have in the pew sheet, describes what he sees thus:

This guest his brother’s courage wore;
that, his wife’s zeal, while, just before,
she in steady patience shone;
there a young lover had put on
the fine integrity of sense
his mistress used; magnificence
a father borrowed of his son,
who was not there shamed to don
his father’s wise economy.
No he or she was he or she
merely; no single being dared,
except the Angels of the Guard,
come without other kind of dress
than this poor life had to profess.


As the lines drop down the page we realise that a divine economy is being lived out here. The gentleman of quality is shut out, ‘not for wanting to be himself, but for only wanting that’. In the kingdom of God – and therefore in the life of the Church here and
now – ‘We are’, as David Hoyle writes, ‘called to be ourselves and to be together’ (The Pattern of our Calling, p.138).

Blessing, properly understood, summons us to see self-fulfilment in its proper context: not me at the expense of you, but mutual flourishing. And true mutual flourishing does not just mean me being me and you being you, but demands of us the ability to learn from one another, to empathise with one another, to depend on one another, to enter into one another’s joys and sorrows. Not Jews at the expense of Christians; or Christians at the expense of Jews; not any one group at the expense of another; but citizens of the new society that is the kingdom of God, ‘called to be ourselves and to be together’. Then truly:

Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock…Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. (Deut 28:3-6)

In nomine…