

"The Eternal Yes"

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Text: II Corinthians 1:18-22

We live in an uncertain age, an age of ambiguity and anxiety. The temper of our times, or perhaps I should say the distemper of our times, is one of timidity and indecision if not despair. We live in an age of Yes and No, with few compelling certainties to give us mental or spiritual, to say nothing of physical, security. We are tossed to and fro along every wind of doctrine, and there is more doubt among us than doctrine. It is reflected in our literature which is a literature of anxiety, doubt, despair and life-denial. It is reflected in the indecisiveness of our political life which makes many long for any leader, however misguided, who is affirmative. It is reflected in our theology, which has made a virtue of ambiguity, of Yes and No.

If there were only one person with faith and fortitude to say Yes. Yes to the world, Yes to life. Yes to man, Yes to God. Let that Yes ring out as a great shout. God knows we need to hear some robust shout amid the pallid mutterings of the fearful little men hiding in their private holes who write our novels, paint our pictures, lecture in our universities or preach from our pulpits. They are so frequently cancerous with contempt, without any healing compassion. Their jeremiads come not from deep concern but from sniffing self-pity. Our bookstores are odorous with the putrifying works of misunderstood childhood, nasty puberty, aimless adulthood, and vague and decaying age. Life is so frequently presented as a sorry business, and man as a sickly creature. And if there is God, he is a god of vague generality.

Therefore it is good, so good, to read the words of Paul in our scripture today which I give in a contemporary translation. "As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Sylvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes . . . This is why we utter the Amen through Him, to the Glory of God."

This is the Christian gospel, the true Christian gospel, which is the good news of God to men. Christ is the eternal Yes. He is not negative, but affirmative. He is not our despair but our certain hope. He is not death in life, but life that denies death. He does not answer all our questions. But it is not knowledge that we need so much as faith. Faith gives substance to the things we hope for, and faith is always and ever affirmative. Faith says Yes, and Christ says Yes. Yes to God. He does not so much define God, or defend God certainly, or even argue about God. Rather He asserts God. More than that, in Himself He reveals God. "He who hath seen me hath seen the Father." As Paul said, "He is the eternal Yes pronounced on all the promises of God."

Here are none of the futile arguments of a Bishop Robinson about whether God is up there or down here, or whether He is a being or Being itself. Here is an affirmation of God without a definition of God. Without faith, Paul says, it is impossible to please God. "For he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." And so Christ pronounces Yes to all the promises of God. It is our purpose to proclaim a living faith in a living God.

As Emerson said, "It is the office of a true teacher to show that God is, not was, that He speaketh, not spake." A living God who is and who speaks. Here then is the Yes of Christ that God is and that God is

with us and for us in love. That the ultimate certainty in all life is the love of God set abroad in our hearts by faith. And if God be for us in love, who can be against us? "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Strong in that faith, you and I may say Yes to life. Ultimately and always the faith that all things work together for good to those who love God and who are kept in His love.

We say Yes to life, and saying it we do not pray for an easy life. We pray that we may be strong men in life. Paul wrote, and we echo, "I have learned to find resources in myself whatever my circumstances. I know what it is to be brought low and I know what it is to have plenty. I have been very thoroughly initiated into the human lot, with all its ups and downs. Fullness and hunger, plenty and want. I have strength for everything through Christ who gives me power."

These words of Paul, I say, we echo. This is the continuing experience of those of us who in our own lives have leaned heavily on the everlasting arms and known in all the experiences of life this tremendous resource which in all those things makes us more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

Like Paul, may I make my personal testimony. I think I can say with him that I have been very thoroughly initiated into the human lot with all its ups and downs. And if I say, as I do, Yes to life, it is not as one who has been sheltered from the vicissitudes of life. I think I know something about life. I think I have lived in some measure, and I say Yes to life. I have known what it is to be in want, to have nothing but a burden of debt. But I know that life is not made of up of things nor lack of them. I do not minimize the tragedy of poverty, but I do say that poverty is relatively unimportant if one has some resources of mind and spirit. The degradation of poverty is fully felt by those whose minds and spirits are as empty as their larders, as is to often true. Conversely, poverty of the spirit may destroy life for those who are rich. I have known suffering, physical suffering. Pain is familiar to me. I have experienced bodily infirmity, I have known the anguish of thirst, the gnawing insistence of hunger, the numbing burden of great weariness. I have lived for months in company with death each hour of every day.

I have known something of suffering. But in suffering I have also known what Paul calls the "fellowship of suffering," the comradeship of the cross. I would not certainly seek suffering in life. But I would scorn the soft life sheltered from it which would separate me from the suffering of mankind. In war I sought to share the suffering of those who suffered in combat. And as in war, so in life I would share with the suffering of mankind. And I have known in the midst of pain the consolation of the Christ. Of the Christ, the wounded physician who heals, who suffered as we suffer and who has compassion for our pain. And this I know out of the experience of my own life and out of the witness of other lives with whom I have been associated. I know that one may walk in the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil knowing that the Shepherd is there.

But I would also protest against that perverted picture of life which magnifies the suffering of life out of all proportion. If there is pain in life there is also pleasure. If there is agony there is also ecstasy. I have known, in the words of Peter, "joy unspeakable and full of glory." I have known love that was real and friendships that were true. I have looked on beauty. I have communed with great minds in eager search for truth. I have received more kindness than I have merited and far more appreciation than I have ever earned. If one knows the sorrow and sufferings of life one knows and records and gives thanks for its

many blessings that crown our days.

The scripture says, "This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." And I would say, This is the life that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

I have known sorrow as you have. Of the six in my life who were most precious to me, three have been taken from me by premature and tragic death, and one crippled for life. There is nothing in our faith that could relieve us of the awful loneliness that must be ours who have known the loss of those most dear to us. There is nothing in our faith that gives meaning to meaningless tragedy. For us the mystery of suffering and sorrow remains a mystery, hid in God. But hid in God.

But those who say Yes to life will not be embittered by sorrow. They will remember with deep gratitude the years they have known rather than vainly regretting the years they may not know. Moreover they will know the comfort of the Christ. Comfort in its true meaning which is that we receive strength to bear our grief. And ours is the God in Christ who suffers with us that we may never be alone in our sorrow.

Finally, the Christ who says Yes to life and in whom we say Yes to life, says No to death. I am come that ye might have life, He says, and His gift of life is more than the paltry years of our earthly living. He gives us life, and in giving us life He gives us eternity. He is the risen Savior who has conquered death for all men. Our sorrow, He assures us, will be turned into joy. He is the Yes to all the promises of God. And this is God's promise in Him. Hear that gracious assurance that He gives us. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one."

We who know ourselves and our dear ones held in the hand of God say Yes to life abundant and eternal. This then is the promise of God, that we are kept in His love. This is the assurance made living in Christ. We say Yes to life and accept from His hand life that is abundant, life that has no end.

Prayer: We thank Thee our Heavenly Father for Thy precious gift of life, with its misery and its majesty, its mystery and its meaning, its joy and pain, its agony and ecstasy. We thank Thee for the life which Thou hast given us. But especially we thank Thee that in life we are in Thee. And Thy love gives meaning to our life, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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