

...But God, who is rich in mercy...

Ephesians 2:1-10.

Andrew Callander, St. Stephens Leith Valley, 27 Sept 2009.

Readings: Ephesians 2:1-10 and Romans 8:31-39.

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else (Eph 2:1-3).

God's Word speaks to us of our trespasses and sins, our enslavement by demonic spirits, our perverted desires, our disobedience, and the wrath of God. How can we hear these words? How can we hear what God wants us to understand when he speaks to us of our sin and disobedience? If we think that God's word about our sin is God's first, last, and only word to us, we risk thinking that sin is the central and decisive fact about us, that we are fundamentally evil, and that God's primary and original disposition toward us is anger and wrath. If we imagine that God's fundamental orientation toward us is judgement, condemnation, and wrath, this will distort everything else about how we understand the Christian faith. We will imagine that the Cross only speaks of the brutality and vindictiveness of God. We will imagine that Election only points to a God who is arbitrary and uncaring. If we think that God's word about our sin is God's only word to us, his commands will seem burdensome and unreasonable. We will imagine that what God really wants is to rob us of our freedom and to fill us with a never-ending sense of failure and guilt.

To hear what God wants us to understand when he speaks to us of our sin and disobedience we must hear it in the context of God's first and last word to us. God's first word to us is that *God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will (Eph 1:4-5)*. The very reason that God created all that exists is because God had already in love decided that he wanted to share himself with human creatures and that he wanted us to participate with him in the outworking of his plan for all creation. God created us to be holy and blameless before him in love. This means that God wants us to be truly human, truly free, and to be rightly related to God and to others in love, trust, security, dignity, and honour. And all of these things God has accomplished for us *in Christ*. Jesus Christ is God's Elect, his Chosen One, and all who are in Christ are chosen in him. "Chosen in Jesus Christ" is God's first word to us.

God's last word to us is his everlasting word that *he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph 1:9-10)*. It is God's plan and desire to gather up all things in Jesus Christ, to reconcile and redeem a lost humanity, and to heal and restore the created order. This is what Christian hope longs for and what God has promised and what we see proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Gathered in Jesus Christ" is God's last word to us.

"Chosen and Gathered in Jesus Christ" is God's first, last, and everlasting word to us, and it is Jesus Christ who is central and decisive for who we are and who we shall become – not our sin! In Jesus Christ the Word of God to us is a resounding affirmation – a loving

and decisive YES, YES, and YES again! *Yes* I have created you in freedom and in love, *Yes* I have created you godly and good, *Yes* I desire to be in fellowship with you, and *Yes* I desire your freedom, dignity, and honour as the true human creatures that I have created you to be. Jesus Christ is God's resounding YES to us!

But the Word of God to us also contains God's NO. God says *No* to our thinking that we can be our own lord and master. God says *No* to our idea that we can find fulfillment independently from God. God says *No* to the crazy idea that we can be truly free by rejecting God's will for us. God says *No* to our sin and enslavement by demonic forces. God's *No* comes to us as his judgement and his wrath, that in our ignorance, foolishness, and rebellion we have chosen all that God has condemned and rejected. God's *No* is God's love for us because God does not wish for us the wretched existence that sin makes inevitable. God judges, and condemns sin because sin robs us of the true freedom, dignity, and honour that God intends for us but which drives us into bondage, insecurity, guilt, emptiness, violence, and loneliness – in the end sin only ever condemns us. God says NO!! to all this. But his *No* is always for the sake of his *Yes*. The reason God is so concerned about us in our bondage to sin is because God desires that we know the freedom of his love. This is how we must understand the Word of God that speaks of our trespasses and sins. God speaks of these things because he wants us to know the love, trust, security, dignity, and honour that he intends for us and brings to us in Jesus Christ.

It is by God's grace that we understand his NO to be a word of loving tenderness and compassion. This is because God's NO is surrounded on all sides by his everlasting YES. Thus God's word of judgement is also his word that our sin is forgiven. This does not minimise our sin. It does not mean that we should not take it seriously. God is not mocked; we do indeed reap what we sow. But this is not all that we reap and we do not reap it all! For God has seen to it that, centrally and decisively, God reaps what we have sown so that we may reap what he has sown for us in Jesus Christ. This means that when we hear God's NO in faith, it points us to his YES in Jesus Christ. It means that the knowledge of our sin is at the same time the knowledge of the forgiveness of our sin through Jesus Christ. And all this is the gracious gift of God in Jesus Christ by the living Spirit of God. This is what we see when we look at the Cross. Yes we see God's terrifying NO to sin, but we also see God's amazing YES to us, for there we see God's wrathful love poured out in all its extravagance, never his wrathful hate, for God's everlasting word to us is that we are chosen and gathered together in Christ.

The greatest and best word that God speaks to us is found in this passage. *But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* (Eph 2:4-9). God speaks to us the single word – “but” (Eph 2:4). **But** God who is rich in mercy – even when we were dead, God made us alive! Alive in Jesus Christ through God's immeasurable gift of grace!

Notice how we tend to use the word “but”.

- “I’m not racist you know, *but* ...”
- “I know you asked me not to take your car, *but* ...”
- “Yeah I know that lying is bad, *but* ...”
- “That’s a really nice dress you’re wearing, *but* ...”

When we use the word “but” it is often to make a critical remark, or to excuse our own bad behaviour by pretending that we are a special case. God never uses the word “but” in this way. God always tells us the truth. The truth about us is that God has made us for glory and honour, however we have in our foolishness and sin rejected this and followed our own way. *But* ... God has not given up on us and has reconciled and redeemed us in Jesus Christ and wants us to know about this reality and to allow our lives to be transformed by this truth by the enabling power of his living Spirit who is the seal and promise of all that God intends for us. God uses the word “but” to tell us the truth about us, to tell us that even though we might feel lost, guilt-ridden, and directionless, that this is not the last word about us. God says “but” to tell us that despite everything he loves us, there is hope for us, and that all is not lost.

To me “but” seems too short a word for such a big idea. I prefer the word “nevertheless”. “Nevertheless” has four syllables and hangs in the air longer. “Nevertheless” swells in the mouth and rolls pleasantly from the lips with an air of authority, invitation, and hope. I hope that by saying “nevertheless” we will hear God’s YES to us. For whenever God speaks his *No* to us it is always because he wants us to hear his *Yes*.

- Our guilty conscience might say to us “you are a sinner!” But the Word of God says *nevertheless*. Nevertheless you are my beloved child; forgiven, reconciled, and redeemed in Jesus Christ for friendship with God to be restored to your true and proper status as a glorious child of God.
- The persecutor and critic within us might say, “Look at you – how can you of all people call yourself a Christian?” But the Word of God says *nevertheless*. Nevertheless it is not it on account of your failings, weakness, brokenness, and sin that God loves you less, nor is it because of your competence, knowledge, accomplishments, or goodness that God loves you more. It is by the grace of God that he has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. And this is God’s gift to us secured and vouchsafed by Jesus Christ and this is something that will never be taken away from us for there is “nothing in all creation that is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).
- The insecure and frightened child within us might think “but I am a useless nobody, how could God ever be concerned about me?” But the Word of God says *nevertheless*. Nevertheless you are quite wrong to think this. As we listen to the Word of God we must allow God’s confident truth (his *YES* to us) to replace our own insecure and frightened falsehood (our *no* to ourselves). It is simply not true that we are useless nobodies. We are human creatures, created by God in God’s own image that we may be God’s children and partners, that we may relate to God and to others in love and freedom, in dignity and honour.

Our problem is that in our misery or our false humility we speak our own “no” to ourselves. We condemn ourselves and tell ourselves how useless and vile we are. God says NO to this effort. We are not our own judges! Alternatively in our false self-confidence we speak our own “yes” to ourselves. We try to justify ourselves by our own words and actions. We try to tell ourselves how marvelous we are and try to elevate ourselves by the power of our own positive thinking. God says NO to this effort also. We are not our own saviours! We simply do not have the competence or authority to be our own saviours and our own judges, and it is precisely our effort to be our own saviours and judges that constitutes our sin. God says NO!!! to this effort. It is foolish, wrong, and unnecessary. God invites us to listen to and believe his NO and his YES, for it is God

alone who is our judge and saviour and he has chosen and gathered us together in Jesus Christ.

As God speaks his *Nevertheless* to us we must learn to listen to this word, put our complete confidence in this word, and allow God's Holy Spirit to shape our lives by this word. We must allow this word to speak to and heal our insecurities, our doubts, and our fears. And as God's *Nevertheless* starts to shape our lives, God in turn calls us to bring God's *Nevertheless* into all of the relationships that we have with others so that we may learn to speak our own "nevertheless" to others as an echo of God's great *Nevertheless* to us all.

Someone insults, betrays, or afflicts you and your first instinct is to return insult with insult, betrayal with betrayal, and affliction with affliction. But the Word of God urges us instead to say *nevertheless*. *Nevertheless* what is this insult, betrayal, or affliction from this poor person compared to the wonderful affirmation and blessing that you have from God? *Nevertheless*, hurt though you are by this insult, betrayal, or affliction, this too is a person God loves and seeks to bring healing to. *Nevertheless*, in this situation God is calling you to be an instrument of God to reflect the loving grace of God into this sorry situation. *Nevertheless*, in spite of all this hurt, God is calling each one of us to be his partners in this process.

His partners in this process! This is the astonishing conclusion to this amazing passage that speaks of God's gracious "Nevertheless" to us. *For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life* (Eph 2:10). God has made us for a purpose and by God's grace we are what he has made us. He has created us in Christ Jesus for good works. The good works that God has created for us God has already prepared for us in Christ. The good work God gives us corresponds to God's good work. We cannot do the work that God alone can do, but he gives us good works that correspond to, reflect, and point to the good work that he alone does. God calls us to hear and believe his own loving *Nevertheless* and to be his partners in speaking this *Nevertheless* into the lives of others.

- You might have a thousand excuses – God says *Nevertheless*.
- You might feel competent and strong and think you don't need the grace of God – God says *Nevertheless*.
- You might have a thousand fears and insecurities – God says *Nevertheless*.
- You might have a thousand rational arguments that you have confidence in that you hope will keep God at a distance – God says *Nevertheless*.
- You might feel sinful, guilty, and unworthy – God says *Nevertheless*.

God says *Nevertheless* you are my beloved child chosen and gathered together in Jesus Christ for freedom and love, for dignity and honour, and for glory and truth. Won't you stop listening to all of your own false "Yes's" and "No's" and listen to Me?