



THE AFFIRMING CHRIST – God’s “Yes” to Humanity

... his nature is all **Yes**. For in him is found the **Yes** to all God’s promises and therefore it is *in Christ* that we answer ‘Amen’ to give praise to God.¹

Paul speaks of Christ as the “Yes” of God. In a world of “No” this is truly good news – truly gospel. And the church does not escape the world of “No”; indeed, it has helped to shape much of what can be seen as negative and judgmental throughout the centuries. Religion in general has a tendency to ere on the negative side and this has been understood as the propensity of the human psyche to ‘project’ a negative self image onto a God ‘out there’. Projection is a very real psychological force for shaping our deities. Pascal once quipped, *God made man in his own image and man returned the compliment*. By this he was saying that the image we have of God is very often shaped by the image we have of ourselves – this is projection. Brennan Manning – a self-confessed recovering alcoholic Roman Catholic priest says this;

The mechanism of projection is a process of unwittingly ascribing to God our own attitudes and feelings as an unconscious defense of our own inadequacy or guilt.²

Undoubtedly as human beings we carry with us to a lesser or greater degree a sense of guilt and the big question is whether that guilt informs, or is informed by, our religion. In other words, do we know God to be one who is angry at our sin and as a result feel condemned before such a God; or, have we been made to feel guilty because we *imagine* God to be one who is angry at our sin and therefore feel condemned before such a God? The only way we can approach this question is to examine our image or images of God and consider where they have come from. I have no time to approach this examination in any breadth as part of this Advent Study so I shall continue to look at the one who, as I have made reference to in previous studies, is described as *the visible image of the invisible God*³ – Jesus the Christ as the primary image of the transcendent God. It is my conviction that as we spend time meditating on the person and character of Jesus the Christ we draw near to something of what the Christian God is really like (in so much as we can ever know the unknowable). When we spend any time in the presence of Jesus the Christ something that becomes very clear very quickly is that any sense of God being the wrathful judge in the sky ready to squish us like a bug is far from the picture we see in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Bernard Bush in an essay, *Coping With God*, says this about guilt;

I hope it is clear that feelings of guilt, accompanied by anxiety, fear and restlessness, arise from deep within ourselves and are not an accurate gauge of the state of our souls before God. We cannot assume that he feels about us the way we feel about ourselves, unless we love ourselves intensely and freely.⁴

The “Yes” of God shows that his purpose is to embrace all of humanity in the affirmative as he welcomes the rejects and outcasts of society into fellowship with him (especially the religious outcasts). His resounding cry throughout the landscape is, *I did not come to judge but to heal*⁵

¹ 2 Corinthians 1.19b,20

² Brennan Manning, *Stranger To Self Hatred* pg 10

³ Colossians 1.15

⁴ Bernard Bush, *Coping With God* – quoted from *Stranger To Self Hatred* pg 12

⁵ John 12.47

coupled with the admonishment to each of us *not to judge lest we find ourselves judged*.⁶ The sense of this is that when we judge another we are once again engaging in projection and as such the judgment we make of another is really a judgment of ourselves. Very often the religious right who insist that judgment is at the core of the gospel message do so only because of their own repressed fear of judgment and the inability to confront their fear and truly receive the grace freely given in Christ. Sadly those who shout the loudest in condemnation of sin are often the ones who are then found out to be living in 'secret sin' – a simple survey of 'fallen' TV evangelists will illustrate my point.

The problem with a God shaped in the image of a judge who decrees that humankind is guilty and therefore requires some form of compensation as a means of putting the situation right can only result in an image that is incongruous in our present society. Make no mistake, I am fully aware of the propensity for human beings to engage in attitudes and actions that are far from consistent with what we might understand as the commandments of God. However, as to why or how this is the case, we now know that it is far more complex than a simple notion of *original sin* or what has also been understood as the *total depravity of mankind*.⁷ It is much more likely that as human beings we are a work in progress and as such we make mistakes – some of which are almost incomprehensible in the scope of their devastating effect – World War I & II for example. However, such gross acts of violence and power-crazed selfishness do not necessarily justify a doctrine that maintains that all of humankind is inherently evil. That we are in some way estranged and in need of repair or healing is a reasonable notion. In one way or another we are all looking for a way 'back home'. It is into this landscape that Jesus issues the unconditional invitation to *Come all who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest*.⁸ Interestingly, in the Greek, this invitation is heavily weighted towards those who are *overburdened by religious requirements* and as such Jesus seems to be acknowledging that there are many who, rather than feeling welcomed and accepted by the religious, are in actual fact overburdened and put off by them – a salutary warning for those of us who wish to promote our religion. It is obvious that many today have 'voted with their feet' and decided that such notions of reward and punishment have no resonance for them in today's world. Marcus Borg comments on this in his book, *The God We Never Knew*;

People struggle with the internal dynamics generated by this model. It is not a comfortable model. It generates guilt. It may also reinforce guilt that is already present for other reasons People struggle with this model for yet another reason. Many in the modern world (including many Christians) find this model and the way it shapes the Christian story increasingly more unbelievable. Perhaps our ancestors several generations back could believe it with less difficulty. But for us, the awareness of global religious pluralism and of the cultural origins of religion and its social and psychological functions makes it difficult to believe Thus its final contribution to the internal dynamics of the Christian life is that it makes it seem incredible⁹.

The Fall/Redemption Model

This model, which emphasizes a reward/punishment understanding of the salvation story of God, is one that is often referred to as the fall/redemption model. It has an unhealthy focus on sin and all that is negative about humanity and creation. It is focused on death rather than life, on judgment rather than blessing. This model has been most prevalent in the origins of the western Christian church and for centuries has informed our image of God. It is a model more suited to facilitating 'power over' rather than 'service of'. It is not a model that can be easily found in the life of Jesus the Christ. In many respects this model resounds with the "No" of God rather the "Yes" of God and becomes far from good news. If it is overly emphasized it becomes a distortion of a

⁶ Luke 6.37, Matthew 7.1

⁷ This is a generalization but *original sin* is a predominantly Catholic (in the denominational sense) idea and *total depravity* a more Reformed idea.

⁸ Matthew 11.28

⁹ Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew* pg 67.68

truth rather than an aspect of the truth. Without doubt there is a need for all of us to address our humanity and accept that we have, do, and will get things wrong as we seek our own way rather than the way of God. However, it is questionable as to whether emphasizing this as my 'unworthiness' is really going to effect a genuine change in me. It may cause me to feel even guiltier and as such I abdicate my responsibility for my own actions and myself to the religious authority that is able to administer 'grace' in the form of confession and absolution. Ultimately I am not really blessed – I am merely 'let off' until next time – for there will surely be a next time, and the end result is that sin and the reality of what sin really is becomes trivialized. Hence rather than coming to terms with the need for me to accept responsibility for myself, my actions and motivations, I become trapped on a hamster wheel of confession and absolution (a guilt trip) which is in danger of losing all meaning, and I fail to wrestle with what it really means to 'grow up' in grace and in Christ. In his groundbreaking book, *Original Blessing*, Matthew Fox says this about the fall/redemption model;

Ironically, the fall/redemption tradition, in its overemphasis on sin, guilt, and introspection, has actually managed to deaden the meaning of salvation itself. As Westermann points out, "it is assumed that everyone knows" what salvation means – but in fact we do not. The God of the Covenant is the God of blessing. The promises made to Israel are promises of good things, of fruitful lands. Of healthy children and wholesome living. And Israel is to bless Yahweh in return for this lavish gift¹⁰.

God's "Yes" to Mary and her "Yes" to God.

And so we come to perhaps the pivotal story that illustrates the "Yes" of God to humanity and subsequently the "Yes" of humanity to God, Mary's story. I am arguing for a redressing of the balance between the Fall/Redemption model and what some call the Creation-Centred model. The creation-centred model focuses on *blessing* and as such the story of Mary is rooted in *blessing*. Also the context for the scripture we began this study with is rooted in the promises i.e. *blessings* of God to all of humanity;

For in him is found the *Yes to all God's promises* and therefore it is in Christ that we answer 'Amen' to give praise to God. It is God who gives us, with you, a sure place in Christ and has both anointed us and marked us with his seal, giving us as pledge the Spirit in our hearts.¹¹

We know very little about Mary, the young girl who is thrust into the most enigmatic story of the announcement and arrival of God in the flesh – Emmanuel. What we do know from the Biblical account is that she was most likely between 12 and 14 years old when she had her vision of the angel Gabriel announcing that she would bear a child and that child would be the Messiah. This was the age most girls were married in the culture Mary grew up and we are told that she was betrothed to Joseph. For the purposes of this study I am focusing on the significance of Mary as one who is blessed and chosen by God to be an instrument of blessing. She is a humble girl of relatively lowly origins. We can only assume this because of what we are not told. If she were from a royal or privileged background it is likely that we would have been told this. A parallel story would be the birth and upbringing of Moses who, although born to a humble Jewish family, by force of circumstance he was raised in a royal household. Joseph also is someone who, rejected by his brothers, goes on to enjoy a privileged position amongst the elite of the Egyptian ruling family. Both of these men have significant roles to play in the history of the people of God in the Old Testament. The significance of Mary is that she was just an ordinary girl who is chosen for an extraordinary purpose. This sets the scene for Jesus to be seen as someone who comes not from privileged origins but humble origins. Indeed, in the gospels we read that the people were

¹⁰ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* pg 44,45 – Matthew Fox was a Dominican Priest and Theologian in the Roman Catholic church until he was thrown out because of his radical views. He is now an Episcopalian Priest and continues to write on Creation Spirituality. Whilst I find many of his ideas helpful and liberating I do not necessarily agree with all of his conclusions. But than that could be said of most books that I read.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 1.20,21

confused as to why Jesus should be gathering such a following when he was merely “the son of Joseph the carpenter”¹².

This then is the “Yes” of God, not only to Mary, but to all of humanity. It wouldn’t be unusual to cast this story in the courts of the privileged and most honoured in the community. After all, the arrival of a royal son, the messiah, might be expected in the royal courts rather than in a cattle shed. From the outset the significance of Jesus’ birth was to be that he came from humble origins – the “Yes” of God is one of us and this is clearly demonstrated in what we know of the life of Jesus. This then is the often overlooked importance of the story of Mary – not that she was a virgin, but that she was just an ordinary girl who was willing to take up the challenge of stepping into the most incredible event in human history.

Mary’s response was to be the “Yes” of humanity to God. Mary answers “Yes” to the prospect of bearing this promised child regardless of the consequences. Just as God says “Yes” to humanity in and through Jesus the Christ, “Yes, I am one with you”, “Yes, I will welcome you”, “Yes, I will walk with you”. So we are able to say “Yes” to God as we follow Mary in her example of courage, humility and obedience. “Yes, let it be to me according to your will”¹³ and later she was able to say, “Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed”¹⁴ Mary knew herself to be blessed. She did not project her own sense of insecurity onto God and imagine that she was somehow unworthy. She understood that she was being blessed and she freely accepted the blessing regardless of what others might think or say.

In the end we have to take responsibility for the image we project of our God to a world in need of grace. If the image becomes distorted because of our own bias then we will have to be prepared to redress the bias and search for the most authentic image. Ultimately the image will need to be one that draws all people to the source of blessing – as Jesus says, *When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself*. When we ourselves are recipients of the original blessing of God in and through the “Yes” of God in Christ. When we become a vessel of blessing to all of humanity because of our “Yes” to God – then we may see the fruit of a more positive expression of the visible image of the invisible God as we lift up that image for all to see. That image can only be forged in our hearts as we blaze with the burning desire to make the blessings of God known through our own lives because we ourselves have received that blessing. When we grasp this truth we shall perhaps understand what Edmund Jabés speaks of in his novel, *The Book Of Questions*, when one of his characters says,

You give God a human shape. God is a flame, not a face¹⁵

John the Baptist declared that he came to baptize with water but Jesus comes to baptize with fire – the fire of the Holy Spirit¹⁶. He is the visible image of the flaming fire of the invisible God. He is the original blessing. He is the “Yes” of God.

¹² Matthew 13.55

¹³ Luke 1.38

¹⁴ Luke 1.48

¹⁵ Edmund Jabés, *The Book Of Questions*, pg 268

¹⁶ Matthew 3.11, Luke 3.16