

Genesis 15:7-21

Psalm 34

2 Corinthians 1:12-22

John 15:1-11

‘For in Christ every one of God’s promises is a “Yes”. (2 Cor 1:20a)

Sermon preached by Rev. Chris Mostert

[A] Introduction

In the churches of the Reformation the last day of October (or the Sunday nearest to it) is celebrated as Reformation Day. It recalls **Martin Luther’s** symbolic act of putting 95 theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints’ Day (Nov 1) in 1517. It was an invitation to a theological debate about the practice of selling indulgences, which he had come to regard as seriously problematic. It was a highly *symbolic* event, which marked the beginning of the process that came to be called the Reformation.

If we use the Sunday nearest All Saints’ Day to mark that particular ‘feast’ day, which is indeed more important, we have to focus on Reformation Day the week before. This year there is a special reason to mark this day, since this year is the 500th anniversary of the birth of **John Calvin** (b. 10 July 1509; d. 27 May 1564), one of the two greatest Reformers of the church in the early part of the 16th century. This conspicuous anniversary has been celebrated in very many places around the world, including various parts of Australia.

It was against his own strong inclinations that **Calvin** immersed himself in the writings of the *Reform movement* in France. In his own words, he ‘obstinately’ resisted it at first. He ‘came out’ as a member of this movement when he was 24 or 25, and found himself in **Geneva**, actually on a forced detour en route to **Strasbourg**, a centre of the Reform. There were many religious refugees from France in Geneva; and Calvin began to serve the church there, first as residential *theologian* and then as *pastor* and *preacher*. Professor Elsie McKee gave a fascinating lecture on ‘A month in the life of Calvin’ in Melbourne in August. He was an extraordinarily busy pastor, and it’s little wonder that he was often sick and died young!

[B] Jean Calvin

Calvin’s life and work have been subject to close attention this year, not only as a *theologian* but also as one who contributed to *political, economic and social life*. He is best known as a theologian, most of all in the Reformed Churches which accepted his teaching and adopted his form of church government. Increasingly he is recognised as a theologian of the *whole church*. He emphatically asserted that he was in unity with the ancient church, the *catholic* church.

There is something important to be learnt from this. One of the memorable phrases of **Davis McCaughey** in 1977 – when the *Uniting Church* was formed – was his description of this new Australian church as ‘*Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical*’. We belong to the one holy catholic apostolic church, as we affirm week by week in the Creed. We have particular roots that are part of the European Reform of the Church which owes a great deal to Calvin (rather than Luther) and which calls itself **Reformed**; and which was transported to Australia by *Scottish Presbyterians*. And we are further shaped by the **evangelical** renewal of the Church of England in the 18th century, under the ‘leadership’ – though that is far too bland a description – of **John Wesley**. If we are *Protestant* or *evangelical* (in the true sense of the word) let us beware lest we cease to be *catholic*.

Calvin’s major work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, produced in both Latin and French versions, is one of the great works in the history of church. It was his account of the teaching of the church, which was essentially an attempt to set out in coherent form what Holy Scripture teaches. It is, by any standard, a massive achievement.

He emphasised that the whole of Scripture proclaims Christ, even the OT; but *there* he is the one *promised* by God, whereas in the NT he is a *reality*. God made a **Covenant** with humankind in which the Israelites were a *chosen* people, an *elect* people, a people with a unique relationship with God and a special responsibility for the other nations. But in Calvin’s view, Christ could not be absent from the Covenant made with Abraham (Wendel, 209).

Calvin built on Luther’s emphatic teaching on **justification** by grace and faith rather than human effort. For him our **sanctification** was equally important: the renewal of our lives through union with Christ in faith and baptism. We are *grafted* into Christ, the crucified and risen one, as branches into a vine. To be made one with Christ, such that Christ dwells in us, was a very important part of Calvin’s theology and spirituality. And it is no less so for us!

But it would be difficult to say that there is one particular teaching that was central for Calvin; certainly it was **not predestination**! One very careful Calvin-scholar permits himself to say that if one *must* name one idea that was central, a better choice would be a sentence that was actually written by Luther: ‘*all things we have from God, but only through Christ.*’ (Wendel, 358) Again, there is a lesson in this for the church today.

[C] God’s ‘Yes’ to humankind

It is a great pity then that Calvin’s name is widely associated with the doctrine of predestination: that God has, from eternity, determined who would be *saved* and who would *not*. I remember vigorously debating this idea in my high school years with kids from more Calvinist backgrounds than mine. (I loved theology even then!) Later, of course, I read Calvin on the subject. I am struck by the fact that he describes this as a ‘difficult, confusing and even dangerous’ teaching (Inst. 3.21.1). Elsie McKee, when she was there, threw a very important light on this whole subject when she said that Calvin wrote about predestination but very rarely *preached* about it. Calvin’s practice and advice was to ‘proclaim *to* all and pray *for* all’, which certainly stands in some tension with a belief in predestination.

Why did he teach it then? Simply, because he found it in Holy Scripture, for him the foundation of all Christian doctrine. He could not honestly choose to overlook it. The writer to the Ephesians tells his readers that God had ‘*chosen*’ them *before the foundation of the world* to be holy and blameless before God. This text certainly stands in a paradoxical relation to the passage we read earlier from St Paul’s Corinthian correspondence.

He begins in this passage by assuring his Corinthian congregation that his attitude toward them when he came to them was unequivocal. There was no ambiguity in what he declared to them; there was frankness and godly sincerity. His intentions were clear; he was not saying *Yes* and *No* to them at the same time. How could he be, when God’s own attitude to them, expressed in Christ, was a clear *Yes*? ‘For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, was not “**Yes and No**”; in him it is always “*Yes*”.’ (2 Cor 1:19) Indeed, ‘every one of God’s promises is a “*Yes*”.’ (1:20)

God in Christ does not regard us as the Roman emperors of the 1st century regarded the *Christians* of whom his gladiators made sport in the arena: the imperial thumb could point up or down at will. God is not capricious; God does not play with us. The gospel is not sometimes *good* news, sometimes *bad* news. God does not love us today and spurn us tomorrow; not dependable one day and arbitrary the next. There is no ambivalence in God. What we see in Jesus Christ is what we may reliably believe about God. There is no equivocation. In Christ a final *Yes* has been pronounced.

It is on this basis that **Karl Barth**, the great 20th century Reformed theologian, turns the doctrine of **election** into something entirely positive: it is the sum of the gospel. Election is about God’s *grace*; and God’s grace is fundamentally God’s *Yes*. Barth sees election through the lens of God’s *Yes* in Christ. God’s *Yes* is about God’s determination to be *for* us, not *against* us; the *No* of God’s judgment God has taken upon Godself in the person of Christ.

[D] Jesus Christ: the human face of God

This means that our first and last word must be about **grace**. This can sound like an empty cliché, a powerless abstraction, but it is concrete and rich. Humankind is elected – without any equivocation, without a mixture of *Yes and No* – to be God’s covenant-partner; God will *not* be God without us. To say that God has determined us for covenant-partnership is to say that we are determined for *life* and *freedom*, not death and slavery. We are determined for *faith* and *fellowship* with Christ, not scepticism and solitariness. This is our destiny, though we are given the freedom to reject it; but then that is *our No*, not *God’s*. But God’s election of humankind finds its fullest realisation when human beings ‘elect’ God in return.

Jesus Christ is the human face of God and the human word of God; many of his parables are about God and God’s reign. So, like the father in Jesus’ remarkable parable of the son who goes into the far country, God waits for us to come home. **St Augustine** said once that God *loves* us as if there were only *one* of us to love.

May we speculate on what happens when the divine *Yes* and the human *No* stand over against each other? With this question Calvin is right to say we are in difficult, even dangerous territory! On the one hand, we dare not be presumptuous; on the other hand, we dare not underestimate grace. What are we to think? Not Calvin but Barth helps us by imagining the confrontation of Judas's *No* to Jesus and Jesus' *Yes* to Judas. The weight comes down on Jesus as God's *Yes* even for Judas. The last word is that Jesus has died for Judas too!

Is it ultimately as simple as this? Is this what is contained in Paul's declaration that Jesus Christ is God's *Yes*? Every answer must be open to the questions that can be raised against it, but those who think that this divine *Yes* includes even Judas have caught a glimpse of the unfathomable riches of divine **grace**. There comes a point when our questions are silenced and we can only marvel at the breadth and depth of the love of God.

Perhaps there is a word of hope or comfort here, when we think about people we know and love who do not see things as we do, who do not reckon with God at all, or who think that people of faith are simply barking up the wrong tree. There is certainly a word of hope and comfort for *us* when we feel very far away from God, when we feel totally unworthy of anyone's love, especially God's, or when we're overwhelmed by the wretchedness of the world.

That little phrase, *God's Yes in Christ*, contains so much more than we can know or grasp. An American theologian I worked with for a time said once that even now 'Jesus Christ goes his way into the world ... as the stranger, an instrument of the Father's working who carries out his Father's business in season and out.'

(K. Sonderegger) God's *Yes* is all-embracing and infinitely patient. Even its rejection is taken up into the life of the Trinity in the Person of the Son. *Yes* is a very little word, but when it's God's *Yes* it says everything.

Thanks be to God, whose *Yes* in Christ is addressed to all, even to us.
