

God says **No** – and **Yes**

In the Garden of Eden, God said, *No*.

We might dare to wonder why God said *No*? The serpent spoke more truthfully on this point than the Lord, for, when Eve and Adam ate the fruit, contrary to what God had told them, they did *not* die. Maybe God was trying to protect them: he already knew both good and evil: how that brings suffering, as well as elation – something he was later to demonstrate in his Son.

If you asked me who most often says *No*, thinking back I would say parents and teachers. I'm probably out of touch with parenting and educational practice, but parents say *No* to protect their children from things they are not yet able to understand – and have been known to tell fibs in the process. And teachers say *No* to make a school a place where all are safe and can thrive: so one child's actions are not to the detriment of themselves or others. That kind of *No* persists in adult life, where, for example, limits are placed on how we drive our cars, so that we can safely share the roads: *No overtaking, No entry, No parking*. But overall, as we grow up, people, including parents, say *No* less often, because, as we come to know both good and evil, we learn to make our own judgements and decisions. Even the law doesn't say *No* as often as we like to think: contrary to popular belief, modern health and safety law does not ban multiple actions: what it says is that employers and others should take responsibility, assess the risks and act accordingly. But people don't always want to do that and revert to infancy: sometimes we'd rather be told what to do so we can complain about it.

The story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, known in Christian tradition as the Fall, might be read as a story of a progression from innocence to maturity, driven by the human instinct to push at and overcome boundaries, to seek after more and to go our own way. That has contributed to the success of the human species (with no little suffering along the way) – and may yet prove to be our demise. Maybe God could see that. In Eden God is just, banishing the human pair from the innocence they have rejected. But he is also merciful, replacing their flimsy fig leaves with warm, hard-wearing skins – they're going to need all the help they can get.

As we read the Bible, we might observe that God says *No* less often than he used to. Old Testament law is traditionally characterised by *Thou shalt not*s; but Jesus rarely says *No* to people: he challenges behaviour by telling stories and asking questions, leaving us to work it out for ourselves: still free to make our own choices, but better informed.

If God, parents and others say *No* less often, we have to learn to say *No* for ourselves. It depends a bit on personality, but there are two different temptations here. The first is to say *No* too readily. I find that when we need someone to volunteer for a role in the Church...! Seriously, though, there can be times when we lack confidence or courage and hold ourselves back: *No, that's not me; No, I couldn't possibly do that*. Look at the responses God received from Moses, or Jeremiah, or Elijah at Horeb – and how their reservations were overcome. Jesus in Gethsemane wanted to say *No* – but chose not to.

The second temptation is not to say *No* when we should. Certainly in response to what we find tempting – I don't think I need say much about that. But also, possibly, in letting the demands of others dictate our lives, deflecting us from what we are truly called to do or be; because, proverbially, we *find it hard to say No*.

Although he didn't often, Jesus could say *No*. He said it, in word and deed, when he cleansed the temple. And he said it three times to Satan in the wilderness – because Satan was trying to deflect him from what he was called to do.

Actually, only one of Jesus' scriptural retorts is a straightforward prohibition: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test*. The first statement simply implies that to concentrate only on the physical misses an essential spiritual dimension to life: *One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*. Like the Israelites centuries before him, Jesus is learning in the desert to trust his heavenly Father: Satan was trying to distract him from that call upon his life. Jesus, however, knew when to say *No*.

Jesus' third rebuff precludes worshipping the devil because there is an alternative, exclusive claim on us: *Worship the Lord your God and serve only him*. The *No* arises because of a greater *Yes* – as, if we marry, we say *No* to others in order to say *Yes* to our spouse.

That, it seems to me, is the best foundation for saying *No* for ourselves: because there is something or someone greater to whom we want to say *Yes*. *Yes* to our health. *Yes* to respecting others. *Yes* to ethics. *Yes* to what we are really called to do and be. *Yes* to God.

Not least because, more often than he says *No*, God says *Yes* to us. St. Paul wrote this to the Corinthians:

The Son of God, Christ Jesus, proclaimed among you by us ... was not a mixture of Yes and No. With him it is always Yes; for all the promises of God have their Yes in him. That is why, when we give glory to God, it is through Jesus Christ that we say 'Amen'.

In Jesus, God says *Yes* to humankind – and invites us to say *Yes* in reply.