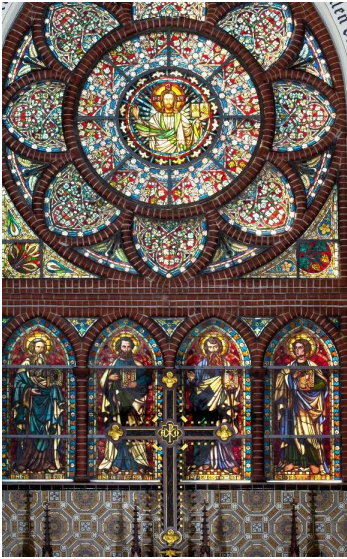


God's Promises and Human Weakness

4th Sunday in Advent

2 Corinthians 1:18 – 22



¹⁸As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²²and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

A friend recently said to me: “I envy everyone who can believe in God, but I can’t—even if I wanted to.”

The reason for his statement was that he views all religions as tools to oppress or manipulate people. This kind of thing happened in the past and, unfortunately, still happens today. This sentence deeply moved me because it shows that we Christians are the connection between the world and God.

This makes us aware of how important our witness can be. Even the everyday life I live as a Christian is significant. Because, as my acquaintance seems to conclude: “Like messenger, like lord.” That is to say: If Christ cannot be recognized in us, He does not exist. When I read the letters of the Apostle Paul, I see that he connects everyday Christian life very closely with the living, active Spirit of Christ. Can Christ be recognized in our lives? In our passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul dares to connect Christ very closely with his actions. He essentially says: “Because God is reliable, so must we be. Or: If with God it’s ‘yes’ and not ‘yes and no,’ then the same must also be true for us.” There was a dispute between Paul and the Corinthians. In this context, Paul had promised to visit them but was prevented from doing so by various difficulties. Therefore, the Corinthians accused Paul: “You are unreliable. You don’t keep your word; you can’t be trusted!”

Paul accepts this criticism from the Corinthians and does nothing less than connect it with the great deeds of God: “God is reliable. Therefore, so am I. And therefore, my words are valid.” Isn’t Paul going a bit too far here? How can he reconcile the great deeds of God with his small human actions here on earth, bestowing upon them a seal of divinity? Isn’t this precisely what my acquaintance criticizes when he says, “People only use God to make themselves look bigger?” But I believe that these very words written by the Apostle Paul offer a great opportunity to bring together what belongs together: God and the Church. Or, to put it another way: the Church’s teachings and faith are revealed clearly and understandably in everyday life, so that everyone can see that when they go to church, they are interacting with God and not just with flawed people. So that my friend doesn’t have to say, “I don’t see any sign of God in your church!”

However, my acquaintance’s questions, as well as the Corinthians’ criticism of Paul, also mean that a great responsibility rests on us Christians. Every failure, every inadequacy or deviation points to our Lord. What a responsibility we have if that’s the case! And how often do we fail precisely because of it. Paul seems to intentionally affirm this connection, even though the Church is full of flawed people. But then he shifts completely to praising and confessing God. In this second step, he seems to set aside himself completely and speaks only of God and his faithfulness. God is not someone who thinks one way today and another tomorrow. God is faithful. And once He has made His covenant with us, it stands—even if the entire universe were to collapse. And even though we continue to be fallible, God still remains true to His Word.

Paul magnifies Christ in his writing. And if Christ is great, then He is also great in His work in the everyday life of the Church. And His greatness is not diminished or reduced by the misconduct, weakness, or laziness of His messengers. The Corinthians had established something like a quality control system for the apostles

and compared Paul and his various colleagues, such as Apollos and Peter with each other. Depending on who was considered good in their eyes at the time, this one would be considered reliable and something of a "super apostle." As for the others, their entire message was summarily dismissed as unreliable and unbelievable. Paul had to strongly disagree with this because God's salvation is communicated through people but not dependent on them. Is it about Apollos or Peter or Paul? No, if it's about all of them, we're all doomed. If there were something like a quality control inspection for the Church today, we'd all be in trouble, as well. There are plenty of faults that could be held against us today. Paul doesn't address the dispute about who is the best of the apostles in his argument, but rather focuses on who stands behind these apostles, which is and can only be Christ alone. Only in Christ do God's promises hold true. Only in Him is everything held together.

Throughout Advent, we reflect on these firm promises of God, as they were conveyed through the prophets. They too were weak human beings, and yet everything happened as they had predicted because God spoke through them. We also want to see God at work in us. In the hymn by Heinrich Held, we sing: "Let the earth now praise the Lord, who has truly kept His Word." This same God stands behind Paul's ministry and also stands behind the Church. Paul says that God's work is not just theoretical, but it becomes a reality in us. General statements like "God is good" and "God is faithful" are meaningless if I can't see them at work in my personal life. God's reliability is not theoretical, rather it enters into our story and becomes tangible. God's promises speak to us. They include us and our whole lives in the promises. Both the good and the bad are addressed by God and He calls us with all our good and bad. This is why Paul can connect something as ordinary as his travel plans with the God who remains faithful to His promises. The same God is also behind us in all we do. Jesus Christ is not just a concept or a spiritual apparition hovering far above our world as the ideal standard, leaving us to say, like my friend, "Sounds good, but I can't believe it." No, Jesus Christ becomes human in a very specific time and within a very specific story. And throughout history this continues. The Corinthians should not only have a general knowledge of God. Paul makes this very clear. The message of Jesus Christ was brought to the Corinthians by Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy at a very specific time. Christ revealed Himself through them, and this Christ was none other than the One who originally came into the world and was born in Bethlehem. And it is this Christ who strengthens and confirms our faith. Paul insists that the Christ who was once born in Bethlehem is the same one who came to Corinth through his preaching and the preaching of his friends. This means that this Christ is far more than the apostle himself. If everything depended on the apostle, then his failure to appear in Corinth and his other failings, which he surely also had, would mean that not only his preaching, but also the absolution of sins, the Lord's Supper, and everything else in the Church would be unreliable and questionable, being negated by the apostle's actions. This is why it is so important to the apostle to lift up Christ and His promise, even when Christ comes to us through weak people.

The Corinthians made the exact same mistake as my friend, who says, "Because Christians are unreliable, their God is also unreliable, and I cannot believe in Him!" This is a fundamental misunderstanding. For if the Gospel depended on us humans, then I would also have to make my salvation dependent on my own actions. Then I will have to stand before the gates of Heaven and weigh my good and bad deeds against each other, and I will have to find time and again that I have completely failed. No, even when I stand before the gates of Heaven, I can only do so with Christ and in His Name. Only in Christ can I say that I am saved. Only in Christ can I pray, "Our Father!" And only in Christ is it right to say that God comes to us through the Church. This is because with Christ there are no ifs, ands, or buts. No "yes or no." Christ is the seal for us because through Him all of God's promises are fulfilled, and He did not only die for weak people like us but also called people like us to be His messengers. Through Jesus, all the negative aspects we have as people and as a Church are turned into positive ones. For with Christ there is no "yes or no," but only "Yes and amen!" Yes, through Jesus, I am a Christian! Yes, I believe in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit through the power of His Spirit! Amen.