

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

One of my favorite television commercials consists of a man sitting in a cubicle with a telephone. He is surrounded by all sorts of different sized and colored signs. But they all show the same word. The same word that he is saying on the phone. Its a very simple word, the two-letter word 'No'. The power of the commercial lies in the viewer knowing that no matter what request is made to the man the answer will be 'no'. It is a disconcerting word to hear. And the commercial knows that. The commercial works because it contradicts our expectations of commercials. We expect positive things from commercials. And most of the time we get them, supersized, fantasy images airbrushed beyond our wildest dreams to be sure. But basically positive. And so placing a negative at the heart of a commercial really grabs our attention.

Just like commercial makers we in the churches tend to like to concentrate on the positive, safe and happy topics. But like the ad that says no, the church also has a tradition of negativity. To be sure it tends to be a closely guarded secret. The kind of thing you might stumble on in a religion class at college, but not the kind of thing we often talk about in public. I am, of course, referring to the ancient and wonderful tradition of negative theology.

Before I go any further let me make it quite clear that negative theology is not theology done by cross or irritable people. As a matter of fact, theology done by cross or irritable people is probably a fairly apt description for a lot that passes for run of the mill theology. No, negative theology is perhaps more easily translated as mystical

theology. What makes it negative is not the mood of the people doing it, but what it thinks it can say about God.

Unlike traditional theology, the negative variety is uncomfortable making grandiose statements about what God is. Instead, it limits itself to what God is not. Which as things turn out is rather a lot. The best example is the question of God's being. Philosophers like to argue for and against the existence of a supreme being. By contrast a negative theologian would say that God is not a being. Not because God is not. But because God is beyond being. God is wholly other than being. For them if God is really divine and not some projection of the human psyche God, then God can never be encapsulated or circumscribed by a human notion of something as prosaic as being.

The irony of negative theology is that although it denies the being and the existence of God, it does not deny God. Mystics believe ardently in God. They just don't want us to conflate our own images of God with the reality that is really God. And quite right too.

Negative theology also offers hope to those who find it hard relating to or picturing God. It reminds us that even our most cherished metaphors and images are just those, metaphors and images. And to those who look for God and find only a yawning absence or a hole, negative theology offers the possibility of interpreting the hole as holy.

The problem of course is that we yearn to fill in the hole. We yearn to build solid foundations, beautiful metaphorical cathedrals of thought, within which we can worship the holy. And in our lives we do the same. We are eager to

seek meaning in our lives in doing things, and it doesn't really matter what. But we remain reluctant to seek our creator in the stillness and silence of our own hearts.

But what if we were to allow ourselves to see the truth of who we are? What if we were to take the step of looking inward? And what if we were to say no to some of the barriers that come between us and God?

One group of peoples had an intriguing way of making sure that they would never lose sight of their true humanity. Each year the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian peoples among others on the North-western American coast would gather all the wealth and possessions of the entire community together. And then they would destroy them. They would erase from existence all the goods and chattels, all the material culture that they had spent the rest of the year creating, gathering and accumulating. The practice is called *Potlatch*. And here is the really interesting thing. The only way to retain status or save face among those communities is to do what everyone else does, and surrender your possessions.

The thinker George Bataille was one of the first to coherently argue that within those communities the radical negativity of destruction actually served a positive function. The destruction recalibrated society and gave its members a fresh start. Potlatch illustrates that even the most radically negative action can serve a positive function. Or as we might put it more traditional theological language, in surrendering that which is ours, we paradoxically discover ourselves.

As today and tomorrow we remember veterans and those who have fought and died serving under arms we remember a similar structure of sacrifice. Whatever we may think theologically about war, and in particular about the origins and handling of the current conflict, military service is still a potent example of how individuals have and continue to surrender much. Everything from the sacrifice of time and health, to the ultimate sacrifices that millions have made in dying under arms or as casualties of war. These acts of sacrifice have to be remembered. At the same time, in the light of potlatch we have to interpret such sacrifice as both negative and positive. And if we do not remember we risk forgetting the human consequences of rhetoric and ideology.

It is also good timing for us to remember the ultimate giving of others as we continue our parish reflections on stewardship. Unlike those fighting on foreign fields, and unlike the potlatchers we are bound in almost inordinately complicated relations to our possessions. But fundamentally, the question remains the same for all humans: whether we sacrifice our possessions that we may know true life or whether our lives are sacrificed for material wealth. Do we serve our possessions, or do our possessions serve us?

The mystics knew that giving up or letting go were the hardest things to do. But they also knew that such denials are amongst the most transformative events. And while no one is suggesting that we act like the potlatch tribes, we have much to learn from them and the mystics.

What we choose to do with our time and all our gifts says a lot about who we are and who we want to be. If we never give voluntarily we risk losing sight of our humanity. Of course, if giving is just about checking the box to say one is a giver that remains about as spiritually helpful as paying the IRS. The church has come a long way from the forced tax that was the medieval tithe, and we have learnt the hard way that as God gave freely so faithful giving has to be voluntary.

One of the things that makes human life unique is that we like to control and be in charge of our lives. And so when we are forced to do things we tend not to enjoy it much. But if we can learn to voluntarily surrender some of the desire to control, we too can be like the mystics. Ironically, the less we seek to control our lives the more we discover about our humanity. And when it comes to giving we are presented with a fundamental opportunity to grow in our humanity. But for that to be true, our giving should not be dutiful and reluctant. Rather, giving should be a joyful surrender of control, an act in which we purposefully practice a Christian version of potlatch or military service.

How we give and what we give, only you can decide the answers to those questions. But I hope that as you consider your answer you will not be influenced by the little man who says no. Rather, remember the infinite God who has said yes to the world. God has repeatedly said yes to each of us: in acts of love, in creating, redeeming and sustaining us. To that divine yes - without which there would literally be nothing - may we all continually give thanks and praise. Amen.