

# THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

## *SERMONS*

BY THE

REV. EUGENE BERSIER, D.D.

OF L'ÉGLISE DE L'ÉTOILE, PARIS.

*WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR*

BY THE

REV. FREDERICK HASTINGS,

AUTHOR OF

"SUNDAYS ABOUT THE WORLD," ETC.;

AND EDITOR OF THE "HOMILETIC MAGAZINE."

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## XX.

### *SIMEON.*

“And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for Him after the custom of the law, then took he Him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said: Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.”—LUKE ii. 25-32.

EVERYTHING is simple in the narrative we have just read. Nothing there to recall the ostentatious grandeur, the puerile succession of prodigies with which religious systems generally surround the infancy of their prophets and of their gods. See Mary and Joseph entering the Temple of Jerusalem. Who would have imagined that so grand a destiny hung over the child whom they had come to present to the Lord? No retinue attends them, no striking miracle marks the ceremony which they now accomplish, and St. Luke merely tells us, in passing, that they offered to God two turtle-doves, that is, the sacrifice of the poorest. Then appears Simeon, that Simeon of whom the legends of the Church have made now a priest, now a Pharisee, now a glorious personage, as if the Gospel had need of our worldly distinctions, and as if it had not conferred upon him a nobility sufficiently high when it had summed up his character in these simple words: “He was a just man, and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.” Yes, everything is perfectly simple in this scene, and yet who of us can read it without emotion? How beautiful is that figure of the aged Simeon, of that man whose whole life has been but one long expectation, and who now sees the realisation of all the desires of his heart! How touching are the words which escape his lips: “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace!” How lively is the faith by which he hails, in a little child, the Saviour of men, and proclaims His destinies, the full accomplishment of which is daily approaching. Does it not seem to you that Simeon is the representative of all the believers of the ancient covenant, of all those who, during long ages, have sighed for deliverance, of all those who have foretold and expected it? Does it not seem to you as if you saw in him the Church of the patriarchs and prophets taking the new-born Christ in its feeble arms and presenting Him to the Church of the future with the words: “As for me, my task is finished; behold Him whom I have so ardently desired; behold thy Saviour and thy King!”

Let us meditate upon this narrative, and may it become for each of us a

reality. Why should we not all find here what Simeon found in the Temple, namely, a Saviour? But if he found the Saviour there, let us remember that it was because he went thither moved “by the Holy Spirit.” Is it the Spirit of God that has led us to this sanctuary? Oh, sorrowful thought! when on this Christmas Day we see our churches filled, how can we avoid thinking of all those whom formalism alone has brought there? How can we avoid thinking that, strangers to God all the rest of the year, they are satisfied, and believe they have done their duty when, on similar occasions, they grant Him a few moments divided attention? In times of holy festival they flock to the house of God, there to behold once again the most touching mementoes of the God of the Gospel; they come and sit in turn before the cradle, the cross, or the open sepulchre of Jesus, and when they have learned once more how much God has loved them, and of how vast a mercy they have been the objects, they conclude therefrom that they may plunge anew, body and soul, in the vortex of business, of the world, and of sin. They reassure themselves by thinking of the religious emotions which they have experienced, as if those very emotions themselves did not render their habitual indifference more guilty, and their levity more inexcusable. . . . O Holy Spirit, if there be any amongst us who have come hither without having felt Thy Divine attraction, without having heard Thy voice, speak to their hearts, as well as to our own, that they and we, attracted by Thee like Simeon, may like him also be led to contemplate and to bless Him whose humiliation and mercy this day recalls!

Simeon, we are told, waited for the consolation of Israel. In these short but striking words we discover a thought unknown to the ancient world, and which gave to the Jewish nation an incomparable grandeur. Israel is a *waiting* people. Whilst other nations grow, conquer, and extend their limits, whilst their only thoughts are of power and external prosperity, Israel waits. Even in the most glorious days of its history, it turns its eyes towards the future. This little nation has a vast, a strange ambition: it expects the reign of God upon earth. . . . Ah! I know full well all the carnal and interested motives that mingled with this ambition; I know that, for the great majority of the people, the reign of God was the reign of Israel, a brilliant Jerusalem, an enlarged territory, enemies trampled under foot, a lofty dominion over all the nations of the world; but all truly pious and holy souls took another view of “the consolation of Israel.” For them it signified, above all, deliverance, pardon, salvation. It was for the glory of God that they thirsted, it was truly His reign that they expected upon earth.

Yet how few they were, the souls that grew not weary in their expectations! For more than four hundred years no prophet had appeared to revive their hope. The stranger ruled in Jerusalem; every day Roman centurions trod the holy ground where rested the bones of the fathers; in Moses’ seat,

proud and hypocritical priests read over, without understanding them, the promises of Scripture; religious formalism wrapped the entire nation as in a leaden shroud; instead of the sublime effusions of the piety of bygone days, nought was heard but the monotonous prayers of the Pharisees, sounding like a funeral knell. At rare intervals, some high-souled believers rekindled for a moment the faith of Israel, but these passing gleams, soon extinguished, left the night darker still than before. The Sadducees, the scoffers, the reasoners of that time doubtless asked, mockingly, where was the promise of the Messiah. Nevertheless, in the midst of that icy indifference, Simeon still waits. Neither the flow of time, nor the wretched condition into which Israel has fallen, nor the sneers of the unbelievers, nor the indifference of the priests, nor the strange silence of God, who seems to have deserted His cause, nor his advancing age, nor his white hairs which tell him that the time of illusions is past, can shake his indomitable hope. Resting upon the Divine promise which he sets against all he sees, against all he hears, against all the doubts of his intellect, against all the discouragements of his heart, Simeon believes, he waits, he hopes until the day when he can exclaim: "Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace." What an example is such a life as this, and for us believers of this age, what a striking lesson!

Do not be mistaken on this point; a Christian is indeed a man who waits. Oh! I know that the Christ is come. He is come, He who hath the words of eternal life, and to whom should we go but unto Him? He is come, He who alone can quench our thirst after righteousness, pardon, holiness, love; He is come, and we have known Him, and we would have Him hold in our hearts the most sacred place. No, we do not expect another, for we believe that neither earth nor heaven could produce a holiness superior to His, or a more sublime charity than that which He has so magnificently revealed upon the Cross. But if Christ is come, His kingdom is yet to come, and it is this kingdom that we are waiting for. Are you of those who expect it, of those who turn an anxious eye towards the future, because the present fails to satisfy them? Yes, you will doubtless answer; for where is the man who would declare himself fully satisfied? All who suffer grow weary of the present; they wait, they hope. But I do not here refer to the suffering of the egotist who hopes to find tomorrow what is denied him today. Every suffering which bears upon self alone is selfish in its principle. No, tell me not of those restless aspirations, of that melancholy which is caused by discouragement, by wounded pride, by envy, by discontent at an inferior position, by secret anger at not occupying the first rank. In all this there is nothing grand; and however poetic your grief may appear to you, it is none the less a mean, petty and fruitless sorrow.

Here I address those who seek and suffer, because they hunger and thirst after truth and righteousness, and because they see around them error, self-

ishness, and corruption. Those are the waiting souls. They wait all the more ardently that they love Jesus Christ. And, in fact, how, after having beheld in Him purity, moral harmony, and in particular, love in all its fulness, could they give up the hope of seeing these virtues elsewhere, and be content to take mankind and the world such as they are, such as sin has made them? Consequently, I will show you men whom the world might have rendered perfectly happy, men who had talent, power, wealth, affection, all that can make life beautiful, but who, having once contemplated Jesus Christ, have felt that henceforth all this would fail to satisfy them. A burning thirst after holiness has taken possession of their soul, and so long as they have to struggle with the sin that besets them, with the lusts that degrade them, they are not satisfied—they wait. They have beheld Jesus Christ, they have seen His love, their heart has opened to all the unredressed wrongs, to all the unalleviated sorrows of humanity; the more penetrating becomes the eye of their charity, the more does this spectacle overpower them. At sight of so much real and bitter misery, of so many bleeding wounds around them, they feel oppressed, they ask God that His kingdom may come, they wait. . . .

Ah! if our heart could love with a love more vast, more generous, more unselfish, if all sufferings and acts of injustice awakened a bitter sorrow in our conscience, would we not all, like Simeon, wait for the consolation of Israel?

But, in order to be sincere, we must confess that the number is very small of those who suffer thus and who feel the ardent need of taking refuge in the expectation of God's kingdom. Let us not flatter mankind, let us not assign too generous causes to our griefs, and to our distaste for the world. Let us humbly acknowledge that when a man possesses health, strength, talent, and fortune, when he succeeds in the world, his soul must indeed be strongly inflamed with love to God to long passionately for His kingdom. Let us acknowledge that between our words and our true dispositions there is, in this respect, a contrast which is often derisive, and that if the Christianity of our period has struck the melancholy chords of the soul, if it has spoken of great sorrows, of ideal aspirations, this language appears very declamatory and very vague to the man who sees how easily satisfied, how busily engaged in present interests, how deeply sunk in ease and worldliness are our lives.

Well! what is required in order that this language may become sincere? Affliction. Affliction, not only with its heavy blows, but with the hard and repulsive trial of patience. Then it is that our heart understands for the first time what, so far, it has only caught a glimpse of. Admit it, ye Christians who think you love God, you must suffer here below that you may understand how God is contemned by the world; you must exhaust all the decep-

tions of earth that you may learn to long after the land where righteousness dwells. Is not that our common experience?

You delighted, for instance, in speaking of the reign of truth, of the triumph of justice. Thinking upon all the iniquities which oppress humanity, oft had your imagination taken its flight towards the time when the cause of God will finally triumph. You had perhaps thought that to indulge in such dreams was to expect the reign of God. Suddenly injustice sweeps down upon you, it enters your heart like a sharp and poisoned arrow; you feel a treacherous hand thrusting the dart deeper into the bleeding wound. Ah! how ardently and sincerely you now invoke the just Judge! The prayer which now escapes your lips is no longer a burst of your imagination, but a cry of your heart! All the oppressions of earth reveal themselves to you in their appalling reality, and with tears and groans you call for the day of supreme reparation.

You spoke with emotion of the sufferings of mankind; this sympathy, I willingly believe, was natural to you. Moreover, it is the great current of modern piety; the sufferings of the poor, of the ignorant, hitherto too much neglected, now impose themselves upon the Church. Your thoughts were turned in that direction: the poetic, the grand idea of Christ as the Comforter was, of all others, dearest to you. But when you were called to descend from those hazy regions of sympathy to meet with real sorrow under its vulgar and oft repulsive features, what then became of your charity? Suddenly here is sorrow reaching you personally; here you are groaning under the pangs of a cruel disease, suspended between life and death, or struck with sudden distress and with a terrible affliction. Is it not true that at such times the veil which had hidden the world of the suffering from your sight is rent, and that now before you appear all who suffer, alas! without sympathy, all who have neither your consolations nor your resources? Your own grief lends a more heart-rending accent to all those forgotten sorrows, and with renewed ardour you call for the reign of the Comforter.

Thus, under the blows of trial, our soul learns to desire the eternal realities. Thus, after having begun to mourn over ourselves, we embrace at one glance the world which knows not God, and unite our prayers with that deep longing of the whole creation which St. Paul tells of to wait! that is our common calling. We are servants whose Master is in exile and who await His return. Ah! guard that grand hope in the depths of your hearts, let not that Divine flame be extinguished by the breath of indifference or unbelief. Like Simeon, you will have to struggle against all the temptations of doubt, against all the sneers of scoffers. Men will tell you: "Where is the promise of His coming?" They will tell you of the Gospel gradually losing its power; they will affirm that God no longer interposes to defend His cause; they will set before you the feebleness and the divisions of the

Church, the defections of those who desert the standard of Christ, the scepticism of scholars, the hostility of the multitudes. Well, like Simeon, hope against hope, fly for refuge to the Word of the faithful God, and, safe upon that rock, wait, wait still. The day of the Lord will come. Happy those who will see its advent; but happier still, in the great day of final retribution, those who, without having seen its dawn, have died fixing their eyes upon the east and firmly trusting in the fidelity of God!

The second feature which strikes me in Simeon is the greatness of his faith. To appreciate it aright, let us cast off our own notions, let us set aside that deceitful prism through which infant Christianity appears to us enveloped in the most magnificent tints of grandeur and poetry. What does Simeon see in the Temple of Jerusalem? A poor child brought thither by poor parents. What more frail, what more uncertain than His future? A child without glory, without appearance! Yet in this child he discovers Him who is to be the glory of Israel, and what is more marvellous still and utterly foreign to a Jewish mind, Him who is to enlighten and raise the Gentiles. What a sublime destiny! Accordingly it is the whole of mankind that Simeon gives as His retinue to the little child whom he bears in his arms. Never were loftier hopes attached to so frail a basis! Never did a bolder faith launch out into the infinite, relying upon the word of God! Well, was Simeon mistaken? I appeal to unbelief itself. Let it tell us whether all the facts announced by him have not been realised; whether the name of that child has not become, I do not merely say the glory of Israel, but the highest glory of all humanity; whether the Gentiles whose restoration Simeon thus predicted, raised indeed by Jesus Christ, have not formed, under His adorable name, a spiritual family which continually increases and pretends to absorb in its bosom the whole of mankind; or rather, let it hear the song of Simeon himself repeated every Christmas Day in all parts of the earth by the increasing choir of the Church of the redeemed!

Brethren, have you the faith of Simeon? But what do I say? Do we need to make so sublime an effort as he? Compare for a moment, I pray you, our situation with his. Simeon believed when Jesus was a little child only a few days old. For eighteen centuries now Jesus has lived and has given life to the world. Simeon believed when Jesus had no other train than Joseph and Mary. You see Him surrounded by the prophets who announced Him, by the apostles who preached Him, by the redeemed of all ages who all proclaim that in Him alone they have found pardon, light, and peace. Simeon believed when Jesus had yet performed no mighty deed. You have seen, I do not say simply His three years' ministry, His incomparable life, His stupendous miracles, but you have seen His work uninterruptedly pursued and gradually extending; you have seen His Gospel, everywhere victorious, waging against iniquity, error, and corruption, an implacable war; you have

seen His Church, a thousand times ready to perish, ever rising again and growing in spite of threats, persecution, and scorn; you have seen Christ accomplishing around you, in the very depths of souls, the most astonishing and the most undeniable of works, the conversion of the will, the renewal of affections,—a change, in a word, which none but Himself could have effected; you have seen Him taking possession of souls today just as well as when His eye rested with its wondrous power of attraction upon Levi or Zacchæus; you have seen what His name can do in the bitter temptation of suffering, or at the solemn hour of death when illusion is impossible, when man is on the point of appearing before the supreme Judge, and must obtain pardon, at any cost; you have, it may be, heard dying lips utter, with a last benediction, that adorable name which summed up a whole life of faith, love, and long expectation. All this, if others have ignored it, you have seen, you have been its witnesses, and yet, you do not believe. That is not all, Simeon believed when Jesus had done nothing for him. But you have seen His love in all its magnificence; you have been led to the foot of the Cross; you have been told of His mercy and of His abasement; you have seen the body which Simeon held in his arms pierced with nails, struck with rods and streaming with blood; you have seen those eyes vainly seeking a Father's face; you have heard those lips uttering the most sublime words amidst the most fearful anguish; you have been told that you were the objects of that unspeakable love; alas! you have doubtless known this long; this thought has touched you sometimes. But when you should have believed, you have drawn back: before the prospect of a Christian life and of the sacrifices it involves, before the judgments of men, you have fled, refusing even that effort of attention and goodwill without which serious faith is impossible; before so many witnesses who call you, before that Cross where so many sinners like yourselves have found their only refuge, before that love which confounds even angels, you remain undecided, keeping back the heart which God claims of you, or determining, by an odious calculation, to give it to Him only when the world will have had enough!

I hear your excuse: "Faith," you say, "does not come at our bidding," and you add, perhaps, that it was easy for Simeon to believe since he had been warned by the Holy Ghost.

Oh yes, well do I know that faith comes not at anyone's bidding! God forces nobody. It was not to be served by slaves that He sent His Son here below; to win us over to Himself, He draws us, He calls us gently, and that is what Scripture calls the attraction of the Holy Ghost. But who will tell me that you have never felt this attraction, and that you have the right to say that God has not warned you?

I do not know your inward life, but I know my own, and the heart of

man, says Scripture, answers to the heart of man. Now, I beg each of you individually to examine himself before God, and to consider whether he has never felt in his heart a secret voice drawing him towards Jesus Christ. Most varied is this mysterious voice, its accents are not the same for all: it often strikes the hardened sinner's ears like a terrific peal of thunder; but for the little child who reads the Gospel at its mother's feet, it is the kind and gentle voice of the Good Shepherd. Have you never heard it? It has often recalled to your memory your past sins and your secret faults; in silence, far from the din of the world, it tells you of a holy God, of a judgment which it will be impossible for you to avoid, of an eternity which awaits you. It disturbs your guilty pleasures, and pours into them the poison of remorse. When you seek to shake off your thoughts in dissipation, it writes upon your conscience those words which a mysterious hand traced upon the palace wall during Belshazzar's revel, "Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting." It has sometimes led you to understand fully and well how low, how cold, how empty and derisive is the life of the world. It causes you to yearn after a pure love, after a holy life, after inward peace; it calls you to the infinite joys of heaven, to communion with God, to all that is grand, heavenly, and good; it now touches your heart by the memories connected with this day, and in this very hour it persuades you that I speak the truth, and that I have simply narrated your own history. Well! that voice which disquiets, alarms, or attracts you, is the voice of the Holy Spirit. Say not, therefore, that God has not warned you, or that He has left you uncalled and without witness! Do not, by such sophisms as these, belie the most evident proofs of His mercy; do not cast upon God a fault for which you alone are responsible. To unbelief add not ingratitude, and today, if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts!

I have shown how Simeon waited for his Saviour, and how he believed in Him on the very day when Jesus was presented to him. We have still to consider the feelings which were awakened in his soul by the certainty of his faith—all these sentiments may be summed up into one: joy, the joy of a soul which is well-nigh overpowered by the goodness of God, the joy which finds expression in a truly sublime song: "Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace."

Joy! Is not that the feature which characterises this Christian festival above all others? Alas! why should a painful thought here come across our heart? This Christmas night, during which we celebrate the purest and most touching of memories, is, of all nights in the year, that which the world most particularly devotes to the extremes of dissipation and to the grossest pleasures, that in which vice and pollution fill our streets, till morning, with the sounds of their cynical mirth and impious revels. Ah! may at least the voice of prayer, rising towards God from the hearts that love Him, cover all

these blasphemies, and fall back in blessings upon those who thus delight in profaning that which we consider as most adorable and most sacred!

Be joyful, but let your joy be like that of Simeon. Now, what is the principle of his joy? It is Divine peace: "Thou lettest Thy servant depart in peace." And this peace, upon what does it rest? Upon the assurance of salvation. "Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation." Had Simeon been told by some special revelation at what price this salvation would be accomplished? I cannot tell, but what I gather from his words is that he knew that this salvation would be accomplished by suffering, for he clearly announces to Mary that a sword should pierce through her soul. He knows that salvation is brought to the earth, and that is what gives him peace. That is also what should be today the best foundation of your joy. If for you this question still remains unsettled, if for you God still remains a stranger, if eternity is for you a troublesome thought, if the sight of the Divine Tribunal brings you only terror and affright, if the promises of the Gospel, if its pardon resound in your ears like a mystic language to which your heart is closed, how can I tell you of peace and joy? There can be no peace but in truth, and for us guilty sinners there is no truth save in pardon. To your knees, then, my brother, my sister, to your knees at your Saviour's feet! To your knees, if need be, in tears, to your knees with a broken heart! And tell me not that I bring you a sorrowful message, for, with the whole Church, I can assure you that if there be upon earth a vast, unspeakable joy, a joy beside which all the delights of the world grow dim, a joy which makes us even happier than the angels, it is the joy of a penitent and pardoned sinner.

And you who know this joy, keep it not all for yourselves. Let it irradiate your entire existence, and by the joyous light which will ray out from your soul, men will see that the peace of heaven has descended there. Too much preoccupied with defending our faith by arguments and painful discussions, we have not reflected sufficiently upon all there is of power and persuasiveness in the pure and peaceful joy of a heart that believes in God. Nevertheless, Scripture calls our attention to it, for if it nowhere enjoins upon us to discuss and argue, it often bids us be joyful. The Gospel makes of joy a command. Who can measure its mild but irresistible influence, who will tell us how often unbelief has melted in its contact, just as the soil, hardened by a cold winter's night, is softened by the rays of the sun?

Be joyful. Let not your doubts and your melancholy place themselves today between your souls and the opening heavens. Today is the anniversary of the child Jesus. Beside His cradle have the hearts of children. Have their simple and joyous confidence, have their innocent and uncalculating faith, have their unreserved happiness, whose power is such that it unruffles the most anxious brows and softens the most stony hearts. Redeemed of Christ, shake off the weight of life, let not your thoughts and hearts turn towards

the earth when God would draw them heavenward. Join in the angels' song, and if you vainly seek beside you those whose voices would today have mingled with yours, think that in heaven they repeat the same glad anthem, and that the heavenly strains answer to the melodies sung by the faithful here below.

Be joyful, but not with that evil joy which carefully avoids the sight of suffering because it is afraid of being troubled in its selfish security. Christian joy opens the heart and unceasingly expands it, for it is inseparable from love. That which saddens it, on the contrary, that which causes this life-giving stream to dry up, is the bitter regret of having loved too little.

Go, then, brother; go if need be to those who have offended you, to those from whom you are separated by a cruel resentment which casts a gloomy shadow over this day's festival. Go tell them that today you have seen your Saviour abased and humbled, and that in presence of such a spectacle your pride has been broken down. Go tell those who suffer that today you have seen your Saviour taking upon Himself poverty, and that your heart has been stirred; go tell the afflicted that today the glad tidings which alone can raise and comfort have descended from heaven.

If there be in this assembly an unbelieving heart, a heart closed to the faith that makes our joy, to such a one would I say ere I close: You do not, brother, share in all the sentiments of love, confidence, and profound gratitude which this Christmas Day awakens in us. For you this festival is a touching legend and nothing more, and your reason, you say, is too much enlightened to allow of your believing that the heavens really opened, and that the song of the angels was ever heard on the earth.

Now, let me ask this question: Are you anxious to gain us all over to your opinion, and, in a word, would you rejoice to see the time when Christmas would no longer be celebrated? If you are firm and consistent with your principles, this must be your wish. Well, let the memory of this holy night be blotted out, let the angels' song die away, let the name of Bethlehem be added to so many others buried in ancient mythology, your desire will be satisfied. But know this, at least, from the day when faith in the Incarnate Son of God will have disappeared, faith in God Himself, that is, in the living God, will vanish from the earth, for if God has not manifested Himself in Jesus Christ, where is He, and where shall we hear His voice? You will not hear of an opening heaven; your reason cannot conceive of a God who saves His creatures by an act of His love. Well! let heaven be closed, and let your God remain there in inactivity, bound by the most immutable laws. Like ancient paganism, you have placed Fatality at the top of the scale of beings; for the God of Love you have substituted the God of Destiny; but ancient paganism had the Gospel for its heir, while yours will lead you simply to nothingness!

But no; you will not deprive us of our Christmas. Discuss, if you will, in your schools. Dream of a more perfect, of a more reasonable religion, if you can. With the mystery of the Incarnate God suppress the mystery of the personal and living God, I am tranquil. Whilst you will agitate those unsolved problems, the sinful and guilty man, the man who hears the voice of his conscience, the man who suffers and seeks a God who loves Him, the man who feels his need of a Saviour, will, with the Christian Church, go and worship at Bethlehem. Each year he will direct his steps thither; each year more numerous worshippers will surround the cradle of Him whom we call the Son of the living God, till the day when, over the whole of the human family kneeling together at the Saviour's feet, will resound the angels' song, "Glory to God in the highest; peace on earth, good-will to men!"