

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

September 11, 2011

TIMES THAT TRY MEN'S SOULS

I may be dense, but it was not until I was watching a morning news show on Thursday that I realized that I needed to set aside the sermon I was working on for this Sunday and focus instead on the events of ten years ago today. I looked up my sermon of the Sunday after that tragic Tuesday and felt that it dealt with that experience more vividly than anything I could write now. Furthermore I thought that to try to update it would take away from the immediacy we all felt then, the rawness of the wound. This is, after all, a day for remembering, for re-living, not that any of us could really forget. Whether or not you were at Saint John's on that Sunday five days after the attack, you can remember where you were and how you felt. So put yourself back then.

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One searches in vain for words adequate to describe the events of this past week. The magnitude of the tragedy, the devastation, the toll in human life, the physical destruction, the enormity of the evil, all add up to place this event beyond comparison. The death toll exceeds that of Pearl Harbor and the sinking of the Titanic combined. And as horrific as those tragedies were, they were at least somewhat comprehensible. The Titanic sank not through human malice but through an accident of nature and the failure of human technology and judgement. Pearl Harbor, as reprehensible as it was, was at least fathomable given the context of a world war. But this?

I think the most frequently used adjective that we heard on this past Tuesday was the word “unbelievable,”—not only by eyewitnesses, not only by the general populace, but even by TV journalists, one of whom said, “We are taught not to use the word ‘unbelievable’, but today there is none other that is adequate.” On Wednesday morning one of the Legislators began his one minute speech on the floor of the House by saying, “What happened yesterday is unreal.” Such words: “unbelievable”, “unreal”, “incomprehensible”, “surreal”, far from being intended literally, —we do *believe* it, we know it is *real*, though God knows, we wish it were not—such words, far from being intended literally, only point to the fact that this “attack of deliberate and massive cruelty,” as the President described it at the National Cathedral, goes far beyond the bounds of anything that we formerly may have thought possible or conceivable, and that

within the boundaries of the continental U.S.A. which was untouched physically by either of the two World Wars, or any other war of the twentieth century.

I.

Two hundred and twenty-five years ago in late 1776, in that territory between the two terrorist targets of New York City and Washington, D.C., the General after whom our nation's capital is named, his army now shrunken to some 3400 men and quickly dwindling further, was just barely maneuvering himself out of one trap after another set by General Cornwallis and the British troops, who were now pushing through to take the key city of Philadelphia. Washington seemed absolutely helpless to prevent it. One of the soldiers nearby was one Thomas Paine, whose book *Common Sense* had already galvanized American feelings for the revolution against England.

Now, serving as a volunteer assistant aide-de-camp to General Greene, Paine wrote the first of his "crisis papers", which was printed in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on December 19, and distributed to the soldiers in Washington's command. The essay opened with words that were like a bugle call. "These are the times that try men's souls," Paine wrote. "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph: what we obtain too cheap we esteem too lightly Heaven knows how to put a proper price on its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as Freedom should not be highly rated I have as little superstition in me as any man living, but my secret opinion has ever been, and still is, that God Almighty will not give up a people to military destruction, or leave them unsupported to perish, who have so earnestly and repeatedly sought to avoid the calamities of war by every decent method which wisdom could invent."

—Page Smith, *A New Age Now Begins*, Vol. I (1976), p. 805

"These are the times that try men's souls." The words of Thomas Paine, so appropriate then, speak to us as well. Cardinal Mahoney, Archbishop of Los Angeles, said almost the same thing Tuesday night. "The very soul of our country is being tested," he commented. That is, as I said, almost the same thing but not quite, for while a nation may be said *figuratively* to have a soul, human beings have real and immortal souls. A man's soul is his inner-most being. It is the moral fiber out of which he is made. It is deeply hidden and seldom on display, but I must say that we got a glimpse into the soul

of our President on Thursday in the Oval Office when, in response to a question about those who had suffered personal loss, his eyes welled up with tears and no one could mistake either his deep sympathy or his unswerving commitment to victory over this dread enemy.

I have never quoted Tom Clancy nor, I confess, have I ever read any of his novels. But he was interviewed on Tuesday because of the similarity of this tragedy with the kind of intrigue he writes about in his books. He said first that here reality had outstripped fiction and that these all-to-real events transcended anything he could have imagined. Then he said, “It is the principles that you hold onto in times like these that really count.”

These are the times that try men’s souls, that test the stuff of which we are made, that prove our true character and the principles by which we really live. I must say that I think that Billy Graham was right when he said on Friday that this atrocious attack that was meant to drive us apart and destroy us as a nation has had quite the opposite effect. It has drawn us together in a way that we have not been since at least World War II. It has made us reach out for one another in love and compassion, most obviously, of course, in the heroic rescue effort in New York City and Washington, but even nationally and internationally—one is deeply moved to have our national anthem ordered sung by the Queen of England and the Parliament of Canada.

If this tragedy has caused us to reach out for each other in love and compassion, it has also brought us to our knees and caused us to seek God. Innumerable prayer services have been held this past week, most notably those in the National Cathedral and at St. Paul’s London on Friday where the highest leadership of the respective nations gathered to remember and to invoke God’s mercy and help.

It is a great tragedy that has befallen our nation, but we were reminded at the services both in Washington and London of the words of St. Paul at the end of the 8th Chapter of Romans: “I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The hymns have also told us that God is “our help”, “our hope”, “our shelter” and “sure defense”; he walks with us through “death’s dark vale”. As another hymn says, “From the sword at

noon day wasting, from the noisome pestilence, in the depth of mid-night blasting, God shall be thy sure defense.” And yet another

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,
 my grace all sufficient shall be your supply,
 the flames shall not hurt thee, my only design,
 your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

We have been surprised this week at the way so many hymns, so much Scripture, especially the Psalms, and so many prayers of the *Prayer Book* have spoken so directly to our present needs. Let me cite just one line from the Psalms. In one of the Psalms appointed for Morning Prayer on the 15th day of the month, which was yesterday morning, there is the line, “The fierceness of man shall turn to thy praise.” That happens again and again. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery but in God’s providence he became their savior. “You meant it to me for evil,” he explained, “but God meant it for good.” Or again take the example of the greatest travesty of justice, the most malevolent deed ever perpetrated upon earth, the crucifixion of the Son of God. We may think of those who died in New York and Washington as innocent, and in a relative sense they were, but no man on the face of the earth and no nation, not even ours, is really innocent or righteous. But one was perfectly innocent and perfectly righteous, even Jesus Christ; and St. Peter, in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, stood and proclaimed to his hearers that “God hath made this same Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” The Christ whom they crucified, has become—just because of his crucifixion and resurrection—the instrument of their salvation (and ours). “The fierceness of men shall turn to thy praise.”

III.

So we do not doubt that God will triumph ultimately over evil, and we do not doubt that he can turn this present evil deed to our good and to his glory. But at the same time, we recognize that we have been given this week a full frontal view of the evil that still stalks the earth. What are we to do about it? It is well that we as a nation should declare and make war on terrorism and the terrorists that have so obviously made war on us, being most careful however that we distinguish between the terrorists and some of our own fellow countrymen who may be of the same ethnic background. I do not agree with those who say that it is not Christian to retaliate. We must distinguish clearly

between rules that apply to the individual Christian, such as the injunction to turn the other cheek, and those that apply to the state or the nation, to whom, as St. Paul says in Romans 13, God has given “the power of the sword.” We pray each Sunday for our rulers “that they may truly and impartially administer justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion and virtue.” This is why the Church has developed over the centuries the theory of “just war,”—not wars of greed or aggression, but wars against the evils that threaten humankind as, for instance, Adolph Hitler’s Third Reich. So, such a war pursued with passion and equity, but without malice or vengeance, may indeed be what is called for.

IV.

Let me just make one further point in this sermon that has already gone on too long and tried to cover too many bases, and that is that we must all join in a war against evil, evil around us and, yes, within us. Ultimately all evil is inter-related, seeking to oppose good and God, and we must ever declare war on this enemy, and that not in our own strength but in God’s. St. Peter wrote, “Be sober, be vigilant because your adversary the devil as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour, whom resist steadfast in the faith” (I Peter 5:8-9). St. Paul said, “Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:11-12). We join in the war against evil when we listen to and obey the Word of God, which is called “the sword of the Lord”. We war against evil when we pray for the hallowing of God’s name, for the coming of his kingdom, for the doing of his will on earth as in heaven. And we make war against the enemy when we come to worship God in this place and celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Do you know that the first thing a priest does as he begins to vest for service is to put a small square of white cloth on his head, the amice (which ends up behind his neck) praying as he does so, “Place, O Lord, the helmet of salvation upon my head to repel the assaults of the devil.” The Mass, you see, is itself engagement with the enemy, a pursuing of the battle against evil and for good.

Well, I have started off talking about the terrorists and ended up talking about the Mass. The point is that we were rudely awakened his week to the reality that we are now engaged in a battle—a war, it is rightly called—against evil, an evil that manifests itself in devastation and death and in assault on the good and on God. It is a war in which we must all be engaged and on which we must continuously focus. It must drive us to our knees, as it has already done. It must compel us to reach out to one another in love and compassion, as it has done. And it must make of us all true and valiant soldiers of Christ and laborers for his kingdom.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, September 11, 2011. Copyright © 2011.