

The Tenth Anniversary of 9/11

This day invokes candles. Not lights on a cake representing years lived but votive lights representing the prayers for the almost 3000 souls whose lives were cut short that beautifully clear Tuesday morning in September 2001, when religious aspirations turned poisonously political and unimaginably violent.

The images of fully fueled jets striking first the North and then the South Tower of the World Trade Center of course continue the assault, each time we see it. Frightened people jumping to certain death and others, amid the clouds of dust and debris from the imploding buildings, running for their lives. Surreal images forever stamped on this nation's consciousness.

The light of that day and its aftermath is forever seared in my heart. Not so much the glow of fireballs but the many lights of those candles and shrines, together with their haunting pictures of the lost and the doomed, which quickly proliferated through the city of New York and Washington and a field in Pennsylvania, now wet with the blood of martyrs who at certain death had the courage to take the plane down, saving untold lives and the primary symbol of our nation's government, the Capitol.

If we were old enough to remember that day, we will never forget where we were, what we were doing, what we felt or didn't feel . . . as we tried to comprehend the incomprehensible of what just happened, what was happening, what could happen, and what should happen in the days, weeks, months and years to come.

As most of you know, my family and I were at the Church of the Transfiguration, more familiarly known as the Little Church Around the Corner. We lived there on 29th Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues, four blocks south of the Empire State Building, three miles north of the World Trade Center. We saw the smoke. We saw the flood of people walking up Fifth Avenue, stunned, confused, terrified, yet reaching out to one another with an openness rarely if ever seen in that City.

It is still a mystery to me why we were there in New York for only four months but precisely at a time when we were able to minister to people understandably in shock, to preach on 9/11 and at daily Mass throughout the week, including that Friday at the National Day of Mourning.

How do you speak to a people in shock? Grieving and sorrowful, distressed and angry. Or likely as not, so overwhelmed by contrary emotions as to be numb, unable to articulate what it is we are feeling. How do you affirm that whatever we feel or not feel is normal, a part of being truly human, vulnerable, open and bleeding, even hemorrhaging from within?

How do you acknowledge that question which so often arises in crisis . . . "how could God let this happen?" Where is God anyway? Is there a God? Is God impotent to stop the suffering? Or does God malevolently allow it? Natural questions which flow out of the heart of any who try to grapple with a God who is supposed to be loving and yet who allows unimaginable suffering?

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was at Trinity Church's media center near Ground Zero on September 11th. He was not yet the Archbishop of Canterbury but rather the Archbishop of Wales and was scheduled to be at the church where I served on the 12th for a "public theological conversation"

with the rector of the parish. Archbishop Williams published a book of his experience and theological reflections entitled *Writing in the Dust*, which I read for the first time a couple of weeks ago. Rowan talks about being confronted by a man on the streets on the 12th:

He wanted to know what the hell God was doing when the planes hit the towers. What do you say? The usual fumbling about how God doesn't intervene, which sounds like a lame apology for some kind of "policy" on God's part, a policy exposed as heartless in the face of such suffering? Something about how God is there in the sacrificial work of the rescuers, in the risks they take? I tried saying bits of this, but there was no clearer answer than there ever is.

Rowan confesses that while he believes that God created a world with freedom into which God does not casually step, to speak to this, amid crisis, often makes little sense in the moment. To the lifelong believer, as the man on the street was, it may hit home that his God may seem of little use in a crisis. Rowan, ever the theological thinker, suggests that this is perhaps a good thing, for it is the first step toward exposing the problem of a religion that attempts to fit God into our agenda, make God serve our purpose.

If Rowan Williams, a noted theologian before his elevation to the titular head of our Anglican Communion, struggles with articulating faith amid crisis, then I was in good company as I tried to speak at the daily Masses and the National Day of Mourning following 9/11.

And, alas, today, ten years later, I don't have any clearer answer to the question "how did God let this happen?" I can't explain the riddle of a loving God and true human freedom and of evil, or even the often deadly consequences of natural disasters that bring that sense of evil being in the very structures of the world in which we live.

But what I can say today and what I did say then was

- (1) acknowledge all that you feel or don't feel amid this (or any other) tragedy is normal, human, and fully acceptable;
- (2) God may not prevent bad things from happening in this world, but—as the one who promised never to forsake us—God is not be absent from whatever we experience, however frightening, however terrible; nothing—not even death or a thousand thousand deaths—can separate us from the love of God;
- (3) God is always able to bring order out of chaos, to bring good out of evil, if we but have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to receive.

The Sunday following 9/11, the rector preached to a packed congregation. With his masterful rhetorical flourish he spoke how after the ordeal of crucifixion, death, and burial, Jesus' first words were "peace be with you." And while I believe in peace—who in his right mind does not?—and while I am the first to acknowledge that preaching in the midst of any loss, let alone that of a catastrophic tragedy is difficult, I found the Reverend Doctor's sermon to somehow miss the pastoral dynamic of the moment.

“Peace be with you.” Surely peace is at the heart of our faith, isn’t it. We all want peace and this hope of our heart is in full accord with the one who says, “peace I give to you, my own peace I leave with you.”

Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace. The same Semitic root is found in the name of the religion of the terrorists on 9/11: Islam. Shalom. Peace. It speaks to wholeness, completeness, perfection more than “absence of any conflict.” Perhaps that’s why Jesus does not just stop with “peace I give to you, my own peace I leave with you,” but goes on to say, “not as the world gives peace, give I unto you.”

Without justice there can be no peace. Deep in the heart of our faith and of our hope as Christians is the marriage of justice and peace, where, as the psalmist says, “mercy and truth have met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” We want peace. We hope for peace. We long for peace. But that peace without conflict will not be fully present this side of the grave. Only through grave and the gate of death will we enter that larger life where there is full accord, the absence of conflict, the presence of unending peace and joy.

We not only have a right to protect our brothers and sisters, we have a responsibility to do so rooted in the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. While respectful of the tradition of pacifism within the Christian faith, I find myself more in accord with that majority position which holds that at times it is necessary to use coercive force, exercised with appropriate legitimacy and within the constraint of proportionality and non-combatant immunity (words familiar to any who has studied “just war theory”).

And yet as we seek to protect our nation’s interests and to extend freedom in the world, can we imagine—“imagination” is another word of faith—imagine a way forward that does not simply further an unending cycle of violence? Can we acknowledge that the fullness of justice which we seek, just like any “peace without conflict,” will not be in our doing but lies ultimately in the hand of God?

That’s perhaps why the story of heroic sacrifice on 9/11 and the tireless efforts of volunteers following 9/11 never fail to inspire us and give us hope.

In her pictorial book, *Light at Ground Zero: St. Paul’s Chapel after 9/11*, Krystyna Sanderson records God’s presence in the aftermath where volunteers served volunteers: food, refreshment, massage, music, sleep in the chapel across from Ground Zero 24 hours a day/7 days a week for nine months. At times the words of the daily eucharist were drowned out by the snoring of the volunteers catching a few hours of sleep in the pews before going back again and again to recover the remains of the dead. Banners of support from around the globe filled the church and people of all faiths came together to minister to souls.

Joseph Bradley, a crane operator at Ground Zero, put it this way: “I’ve learned a lot about good and evil. I’ve learned a lot about the power of prayer. I never knew anything about Episcopalians or Presbyterians, or gays, or people with nuts and bolts through their cheeks, or those Broadway people, but now I know them all. We’re not the heroes. They are the heroes. They’ve cried and prayed out loud for me. I never thought I’d have a family like this one.”

On this tenth anniversary of 9/11, we remember. We remember. We remember and we stand, stand united with all people of good will throughout the world. May God bless those who died on that day and in the years that have followed. May God open our eyes to see God's redeeming work in the midst of whatever it is we face together, children of one God and father of *all*. May God enlighten and enliven our imagination both to hope for and to work for a better world, that God's will may be done on earth as it is heaven.

In the words of John Henry Newman, we can pray with all our heart:

O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in your mercy grant (those who died on 9/11 and) all of us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen.