

In The Face of Evil

Genesis 3:1-7; Romans 8:31-37

13th Sunday after Pentecost

11th September 2011

The following sermon was the one I preached 10 years ago on the 16th September 2001, the Sunday after 9/11. It was subsequently published in a book entitled *On The Sabbath After – Messages of Hope Delivered on the Sabbath After September 11, 2001*,¹ a book that not only contains sermons and meditations on the tumultuous events of that time but also prayers, poems and photographs as well as drawings by young people. All the contributions were part of worship services, mainly in the U.S., a few from Europe and this one from Canada. The book which was compiled and published by The Ministers' Wives and Widows' Alliance of Petersburg, Virginia, and a Few Ordinary Americans was undertaken as a tribute to the victims of 9/11 and their families. There is a copy in our church library and I will place it on the table in the Guild Room if you would like to browse through it during our coffee and conversation time.

Here, then, is the original sermon ...

As I pondered the events of this past week in the United States, some words flashed into my mind – words spoken 5 years ago (in 1996) in the small Scottish town of Dunblane when 16 young children and their teacher were callously gunned down. As school principal, Ron Taylor, struggled to understand that nightmare, he said quietly but powerfully, “Evil has visited us today.”²

Without any doubt, last Tuesday morning, evil visited New York and Washington. As we watched the events unfold on television, it all seemed so unreal at first. The horror of planes slamming into buildings. The terrifying collapse of the twin towers. Panic-stricken people running for their lives amidst smoke and debris. The nuclear-winter-like conditions of the ruins. It all seemed straight out of a disaster film like *Volcano*,³ or news footage from Chechnya, or film coverage of an earthquake in China.

But then we woke up to the realisation this was not a movie set, not news footage from a war zone, not a natural disaster. No, this was worse. Cold and calculating terrorists had used planes carrying innocent people to inflict death and suffering on other innocent people. And we could not conclude other than that a dark and sinister force was at work in these events. Evil had not only visited two American cities but had visited our world in a most momentous way.

This being so, how do Christians respond in the face of such evil? Is it right to support retaliation against the instigators of such terrorism and the countries that harbour them? One young man, calling a CBC radio phone-in programme, said that, for religious reasons, he believed any kind of military response was wrong; that other methods of containing terrorism should be found.

Subsequent callers, though, argued that terrorists only understood one reality and that was force. If no armed retaliation took place, then it would almost be like declaring “open season” for terrorists to continue playing havoc with innocent people at this new level of violence - and even worse.

In sorting through these different arguments, let us not forget Christians have long held that those who break God's law in any way, and certainly those who do so in such horrendous fashion, must be held accountable for their evil actions – even if military force must be used to pursue this end, as in the war against Hitler.

But, to gain the support of Christian people, such military action would have to comply with the principles of a Just War. That it only be undertaken in terms of self-defence or to redress a wrong and that any force used must be in proportion to the injury incurred, and also not target innocent victims.⁴ Further, resorting to arms should not merely perpetuate the cycle of violence and retribution leading to the creation of another generation of terrorists willing to continue their Jihad⁵ against western society.

However, in the face of such evil as we have seen this past week, there are other, even deeper questions that vex us as Christians. Why, most importantly, would God allow evil to exist in this world he has created? Why would he countenance such evil things as happened to those innocent people in New York City and Washington?

Unfortunately, the Bible does not answer the “why” question about evil. No matter how closely we read them, the Scriptures consistently cast evil as a mystery wrapped in an enigma, surrounded by a conundrum. The Book of Genesis simply says that evil was not always present in the world but entered through the archetypal act of disobedience by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden⁶ and, as such, is potentially present in the hearts and minds of all people.

But, though there is no real clue regarding the origin of evil, the Bible tells us with great certainty that, in the battle against evil, God is not dead, not in exile, not weak, not uncaring but – despite all indications to the contrary – still very much in control. Something we see very powerfully in God's Son, Jesus, as he confronts and conquers the evil forces arrayed against him leading to his death on Calvary and his subsequent resurrection. Something which is also stated powerfully in Paul's words when he tells us that nothing but nothing, not even principalities or powers, can separate us from God's love.⁷

If this be so, then why does evil still seem to have

such free reign to wreak the havoc witnessed this week? Perhaps it's because we live "between the times", so to speak. Between that past time when the war against evil has been won and that future time when we will experience the full effects of that victory.

It's rather like living between D-Day and VE-Day at the end of the Second World War. Between the time the Allies invaded Normandy in 1944 and the final overthrow of the Nazi regime in 1945. During that in-between time, the final outcome of the war was never actually in doubt even though the evils of Nazism were still very real and had to be fought and overcome battle by battle. If we see Christ's death on the Cross as D-Day and his final return as VE day then we get some idea of how evil has been conquered in essence but still has to be overcome in many of its particular manifestations.⁸

Yes, certainly, evil visited our world this week in a terrifyingly new brand of insane fanaticism. But let us equally be very certain that no matter how terrible its appearance or how terrifying its effects, such evil will not prevail. It may take some time to bring about its defeat. Much more than any earthly war that is waged, it may even take the return of our Lord in glory. But, in this greatest of all battles he "has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat"⁹ and ultimately, he will be victorious in all, and over all, and for all times.

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¹ Ed. Brenda A. Spencer, Dr. Bertie Jeffress Powell, *On The Sabbath After – Messages of Hope Delivered on the Sabbath After September 11, 2001*, Brandylane Publishers, Richmond, Virginia, 2002.

² *The Scotsman*, 14 March 1996

³ *Volcano*, starring: Tommy Lee Jones, Anne Heche. Director: Mick Jackson. 20th Century Fox, 1997

⁴ The Just War, www.xrefer.com Cf. also Principles of the Just War. ... Additional Readings: Mark Edward DeForrest, Gonzaga University, www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/poll16/justwar.htm

⁵ Holy War

⁶ Genesis 3:1-7

⁷ Romans 8:31-39

⁸ Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, Gordon Press Publications, August 1977

⁹ "Mine eyes have seen the glory", The Battle Hymn of the Republic, Julia Ward Howe, #225 The Book of Praise, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Toronto, 1972