

AN ABUNDANCE OF GRACE
A Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

I had hoped that my sermon of last Sunday would be a sufficient commentary on the terrorist attack on our country on September the 11th, 2001 so that I could go on to other things today. It seems that current events will not let that be enough. That attack, which everybody now refers to as simply 9/11 was not a phone call to the local emergency services dispatcher, but it certainly can be looked at as a wake-up call. The question then is, Why do we need to wake up? What is the reason for disturbing our restful slumbers, our peaceful dreams and imaginings? Are we going to be like teenagers on a Saturday morning, pulling the covers up over our heads, wanting to sleep in, in blissful ignorance?

I think we should ask: What is it that we can learn in conjunction of 9/11 with the 12th Sunday after Trinity. I think the answer to that is somewhat simple, but we can't learn it unless we are willing to let God teach us the answer.

Today, the 12th Sunday after Trinity, we have a wonderful set of Propers: a beautiful and very meaningful Collect; beautiful and meaningful Psalms; and three bible lessons that each can be the basis for many sermons.

It starts with the Collect, which itself starts with a statement that we almost find hard to believe: “Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve;” God is ready and wants to hear our prayers, because the prayers of believers, saints as St. Paul calls us, are as incense in the worship that takes place in heaven as we are told in Revelation 5:8. Because God is gracious He gives us grace, as He is “wont”, or accustomed, to giving us more than we desire or deserve.

Where, you may ask, is God's grace in allowing the attack of 9/11 to happen, a combination of four hijackings of airplanes that resulted in the deaths of almost 3000 people. To us in our comfortable world, that is unconscionable, unthinkable; it should not have been allowed to happen. How many, I wonder remember the tsunami that took place on December 26th, 2004. The death toll from that event was at least 229,000. We don't remember that because it didn't happen here. Is it not perhaps by God's grace that we have not experienced much greater loss of life than we have experienced in natural disasters and in wars? On 9/11 we were attacked by a

force of evil, and yet, even though there has been evil in the world since Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, so much so that at one time God killed off everyone on earth except for one family. We have to remember what God said in Isaiah 55:8-9 **8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

God continues to allow evil to exist in the world, and will until the Last Day. It should be no surprise that seemingly good people fall victim to the evil of others, for we are all sinners as St. Paul attests in Romans 3:3-7 **3 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 4 By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged." 5 But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) 6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world? 7 But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?** Paul's immediate answer to his own question seemingly offers us no hope. He continues: Romans 3:8-12 **8 And why not do evil that good may come?- as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. 9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, 10 as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."** If no one is righteous, are we all doomed? Do we have any right to look at evil and call it what it is – evil?

Yes, we can do that because after several more verses of gloomy condemnation, he tells us in Romans 3 what he is saying in today's Epistle lesson: that under the Law of the Covenant with Moses we would all be killed, but under the new covenant with Jesus Christ, we have hope because we are justified by grace: Romans 3:19-25, where St. Paul says: **19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it- 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24**

and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance He had passed over former sins.

So, St. Paul is not being gloomy. His gloom and sorrow are only for those who do not have faith in Jesus Christ. In Romans 8:18, what seemed to have been gloom becomes joy as he says: 18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

What does this have to do with 9/11 and hundreds and thousands of seemingly gratuitous deaths? Everything. Last Sunday I spoke of how Jesus' spiritual suffering on the Cross far exceeded his physical suffering. The physical deaths of humans are nothing to God simply because He can reverse that death any time He wishes to by a resurrection, which we believe shall happen to all those who have died before that last trumpet sounds. Do we not in the Nicene Creed say, "I look for the Resurrection of the dead, and the Life everlasting."? The Apostles Creed makes it that resurrection a little more explicit by saying, "I believe in the Resurrection *of the body*; and the Life everlasting."

God is not concerned about physical death, but he is concerned about spiritual death as he says in this verse from Ezekiel which I have quoted to you relatively recently: Ezekiel 33:11 11 Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

So, on this day, the 10th anniversary of that heinous attack on our country, we pray for the families of the victims of that attack, and we give thanks for those brave firemen and policemen who died trying to save others from a calamity they did not think would happen, the collapse of the two buildings in New York City and the wall of the Pentagon. We also give thanks for those braved injury and death on the plane that crashed into the Pennsylvania countryside by causing the hijackers to give up on their plan to crash the plane into the Capitol building and crash it into ground where they were rather than have themselves overcome and have the plane land safely. Their deaths were not in vain, and resurrection awaits them, just as it does for all of us; and after that resurrection, we have the promise of Revelation 21:3-4 3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. 4 And God shall wipe

away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

The OT lesson spoke of the need at the time of Joash to refurbish the Temple because it had been misused and desecrated by those who worshipped Baal. What of the many churches in the country that have turned their backs on God and His commandments.? Jesus gave more than He was asked when He healed people, and what He gave over and above what was asked was almost always something spiritual: He forgave sins; He gave the deaf man not just the ability to hear and to speak, but to understand. Jesus look to heaven showed the man where the power to heal him came from – from God. What are those apostate churches, and even we ourselves, but deaf to God’s message and dumb in our speaking to Him, dumb in that we do not pray enough; and when we do pray, to often we ask for things that are not proper or good for us. The prayer of St. Chrysostom is the last prayer of the services of Morning and Evening prayer before the Grace that ends the service. In that prayer we ask God to, “fulfil now O Lord the desires and petitions of Thy servants as may be most expedient for them, ...” If we learn to pray for those things our souls truly need, we shall find out just how generous God can be.

At the beginning of this I asked “Why do we need to wake up?” I think the answer is so that we can do what we can slow down and eventually reverse this country’s slide into apostasy and sin, a process that seems to have started sometime in the 1950s, but may have actually started earlier. Fr. Moncrief told me that when he was interviewed for citizenship, the interviewer, who is a Christian found out he was a minister, the interviewer asked him if he knew why this country had been so blessed for so long. Marvin asked for his answer, and what he got surprised him. The interviewer told him this: “God chose Israel, but the United States chose God!”

It seems that what is happening in the USA now is that many are acting as if God and His commandments do not exist. And it is worse in other formerly Christian countries such as Great Britain. What is the answer? God gave it to Israel in Second Chronicles a little before today’s OT lesson when in 2 Chronicles 7:14 He said, “14 If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity is one in which the Propers teach us about the abundance of God’s Grace, to Joash and thus to the Jews, to the man who was deaf and dumb, and to all Christians who are members under Jesus’ Covenant of Grace, a covenant which He sealed with

His Blood. That Grace, with its promise of resurrection, lets us know that those 2976 people who died on 9/11 or a little later as a result of injuries sustained in those attacks, not only did not die in vain, but that by God's Grace they shall be resurrected, as we shall all be.

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost are sufficient for all our needs. To God alone be the glory!

AMEN!