

**11 September Requiem Eucharist
St James' Church, King Street, Sydney**

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As the first fact of this evening, I invite you to remember before God the individuals who lost their lives a year ago at the World Trade Centre. We remember them before God – and acknowledge those family and friends whose lives will be marked for time to come.

Matthew 10:16 reads “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” We hear Jesus saying ‘There is a risk that you will be torn to shreds for following my way, but you have the most advantageous assistance of ‘wisdom’ and ‘innocence’. Whether, in Jesus’ day or in any day, the combination of wisdom and innocence has been a sufficient survival strategy is a good question, both for an individual and a society.

We are familiar with the phrase ‘the bad things that happen to good people’. A passage from St Luke happens also to contain a reference to a tower that collapsed, and to tyrannical rulers.

LK 13:1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. [2] Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? [3] I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. [4] Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? [5] I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Jesus saw trouble ahead for Israel and for Jerusalem and its Temple. The phrase ‘you will all perish’ **was** exemplified within 40 years of Jesus’ own death when the whole city of Jerusalem and the great Temple was demolished and burnt to the ground with colossal loss of life – as have other human cities suffered in the centuries since . . . In his own time, Jesus, no matter ‘wise and innocent’ was executed as ‘a sheep destroyed by wolves’ and his story has come to exemplify that of ‘**voluntary victim** whose own death becomes a source of saving power’.

This shows the personal risk of his ‘strategic innocence’ approach in which he was ventured himself for the sake of exemplifying the true Kingdom of Heaven and its unseen God.

The Archbishop-elect of Canterbury was in New York last September 11. Part of his response was *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11th September and its Aftermath* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2002, pp 27-29). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus enjoins some radical response to situations of aggression and domination. The Archbishop of Wales writes [In Jesus’ Gospel . . .]

The slave stands there rather than going away and slowly turns his head [to permit himself to be struck again]. [Then] The peasant looks at the soldier and speaks to him, saying, ‘I choose to go another mile.’ The world of the aggressor, the master, is questioned because the person who is supposed to take no initiatives suddenly does. As Gandhi discovered, this is very frightening for most of those who exercise power. It is action that changes the terms of the relationship, or at the very least says to the master that the world might be otherwise. **It requires courage and imagination: it is essentially the decision *not to be passive, not to be a victim*, but equally *not to avoid passivity by simply reproducing what’s been done to you*.** It is always something of a miracle.

How much more so is there then an obligation and opportunity for **the powerful and the able**, who have been attacked not only as individuals but as a nation, to consider and choose practical, pragmatic responses with enormous care and creativity, and with the closest attention to unintended and uncontrollable consequences. There may well be a ‘strategic innocence’ set of responses that will work effectively for the greater good of this world.

Richard Covey, the Mormon commentator said that “the most important thing in human conduct is the ‘pause-space’ between stimulus and response when a person considers the possibilities of response, and which path to take”. For Covey, there is a space, a moment of poise and control, in which human identity or freedom is known. The Christian, and the State influenced by Gospel patterns of thought, knows that this ‘space’ is not a void, but an opportunity to be filled and informed with grace and generosity deriving from the God of ‘strategic innocence’.

There are only so many story-lines, text-plots and motifs that inform our cinema and our novels, our psyche and our sense of history. Some in fact say ‘three’, some say thirty nine. One popular theme at present is ‘heroic-quest’ - Star Wars, Lord of the Rings and many American Westerns for instance . . . There is also a return to War-Movies that exemplify this motif. The ‘hero’ can be a dangerous friend when it becomes the blood stream of a nation via media saturation and entertainment; held to be applicable in all situations – especially when it is ‘hero with immense power’.

The Christian base-story is not so simple. The word ‘victim’ is more applicable to Jesus than ‘hero’ notwithstanding his final victory. There must be some root link for Christians between the words victim and victory and not only at the dictionary level. Perhaps it is the fulfilment of the path of strategic innocence.

In preparing this address, I found myself re-thinking parts of the Bible to find for myself basis stories and themes that might register and resonate with the events of one year ago. This is similar to what the media and public discourse is doing in its own torrent of text, trying to find a story-shape that will tell us what to do, what comes next, and with what to inform the void ‘between action and re-action’. Fragments of the biblical deposit, of the Bible’s own stories can be re-read critically to challenge and inform us. And that text does not just say what we always knew it would!

For instance: *Genesis*, a 3,000 year old composite story, in one place tells the tale that all humankind dwelt or **sought to dwell in an ever-rising spire or tower** – in a time when all people spoke the same language. This tower also reached into the heavens but the tale teller ironically notes that **‘the Lord had to come down to see what was going on’** – and God then scatters the Babel-dwellers across the pre-globalised world. The Bible story reads so simply.

GE 11:3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. [4] Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." GE 11:5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. [6] The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. [7] Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

The Jewish and the Christian and indeed the Islamic traditions possess the background theme that **not all** human enterprises and edifices **are in fact** *pleasing* to a God – as exemplified in the Babel story. In our world, the concept of ‘a **society** actively seeking to be pleasing to God’ has an archaic and dated ring to it for many. We have a long tradition of valuing **secularity** as a great gift. These are challenging themes as is the theme that some go many steps further and act in an horrendous psychic fantasy as self-styled agents of God for the obliteration of themselves and thousands of others.

But now we live in the atomic age where every human city can be obliterated without foot soldiers having time to be mobilized or use their obsolete weapons. No single nation can today control this science or the technology. The apocalyptic ‘elective martyrs’, world-haters and the desperate can access it - as well as those whose burden is to be the world’s peacekeepers.

Therefore it follows that story lines from another ancient time and place in the Bible story are re-read with new resonances: for instance 'The Revelation' (apocalypse of John)

REV 6:12 I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, [13] and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. [14] The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. REV 6:15 Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. [16] They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!

Violence and religion link and demand exploration. There is a lot of work to do on concepts of violence built into conceptions of the deity and into appeals to a God of retribution, revenge and almost manic wrath. How does this square, for instance with references to a Jesus of strategic innocence?

The violence and terror and loss of September 2001 show that for some, **the human city** is not sacred and worthy of respect. Not just this city or that city, but any city. In fact, there have been many times in history when the sanctity of the human city has been violated on an extreme scale.

The old tale from the Book of Jonah comments:

JNH 4:10 But the LORD said [to Jonah], "You have been concerned about this [mere] vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. [11] But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. **Should I [the Lord] not be concerned about that great [foreign] city?"**

From the time of St Augustine and his work *The City of God*, the Christian can never simply be concerned with just one particular city but with 'the human city' as our collective home and common, highest mode of this worldly fulfillment – all cities and without exception.

The Gospel poses an alternative to hate and revenge. So many 'eyes for eyes and teeth for teeth' are exacted on a daily basis in the Middle East, for instance, that there are few eyes left and teeth are in short supply. Thus the biblical phrase rings true 'if the blind lead the blind both shall end up in the ditch' follows on as the next metaphor in that sequence!

As the last fact this evening, I return to the victims at the centre of this requiem – those who lost their lives - and invite you to remember them before God as precious human individuals whose sudden and unexpected deaths have affected so many close to them, now and in time to come. I invite you also to expand your vision and see these people amidst the greater human throng from many cities, nations, times and places whose experience of life has also been that of victim – life cut short in an untimely way – and invite you to consider Jesus with his strategy of strategic innocence that led him to become the victim with saving power for others.