

# Homily for the Twenty-fourth Sunday of the Year

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*Following the Sept 11 Terrorist Attack on the USA*

In the year AD 410, the news began to spread throughout the Roman Empire that not only had the Imperial Army suffered a terrible defeat, but the Goths, led by Alaric, had actually sacked the City of Rome itself, with terrible destruction, slaughter and atrocities. For the first time in over eight hundred years an enemy had breached the defences of the Imperial City.

When the news reached Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in (as yet peaceful) provincial North Africa, he was stunned. "We went about as if dazed," he wrote, "all sense of certainty gone, feeling that the world had changed and that anything could happen." He would subsequently write his monumental work *The City of God*, which attempted to make sense of what had happened, and to set it in the context of God's providence and salvation.

Perhaps that sense of shock which St Augustine felt at the disaster of his own day is very like what we have been feeling in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the United States last Tuesday. The world is a now different. The World Trades Centre in New York that some of you may have visited (and others like me hoped and planned to visit one day) no longer exists. Parts of the Pentagon have been destroyed. Perhaps five thousand ordinary people going about their normal lives have been snuffed out in a single act of violence. We are told that not just the United States, but all her allies, and every civilised country, including Australia, are at war—but with an unknown enemy.

Our Prime Minister has declared today a national day of mourning. We mourn, in a sense, not only the dead, but a lost world, the world of the week before last, which—incredibly—seems to many, in comparison with the present, to have been innocent and carefree.

Many people are looking for a scapegoat. In their shock, fear, grief and prejudice they even accuse poor desperate refugees with the crimes of the very regimes they are fleeing from. Talkback radio and letters to editors have seen not just outpourings of sorrow and calls for a measured response from the US and her allies, but hateful and hysterical attacks on immigrants, especially Muslims, and on 'bleeding-heart civil-libertarians and multiculturalists' who are also somehow held responsible for the tragedy.

The readings for this Sunday help us to regain our perspective. They call us to see what has happened in the light of God's plan of salvation. And they do this by calling on us to look first to **ourselves** to try to gain an understanding of how good and evil are at work in the world. And they do this primarily by giving us in the Gospel a **portrait of what God is like**: a true portrait, told to us in parable by the Incarnate Word himself.

The Gospel begins with the complaint against Jesus by the scribes and the Pharisees. "This man," they said, "welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The second reading from the first letter of St Paul to Timothy declares: "This is a true saying, to be completely accepted and believed: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." The writer goes on, "**I am the worst of them**, but God was merciful to me." This is no mere assent to a doctrine. It is a witness to what God has done in a particular person's life. It is full of the joy of the Gospel, of the joy of finding the lost sheep, the lost

coin; of finding the Son who was dead but who is now alive. The great joy of restoration. It is a triumphant celebration of what God has done, and the joyfulness comes in the realisation that it is done for 'me'—for each one of us.

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” There is no good news for us in this saying (“to be completely accepted and believed”), no liberating power for us, if it does not **refer to us**. For St Paul, to recognise who Jesus was, was to recognise **himself** as a sinner. He saw himself as he truly was: not the righteous Pharisee, the holy man defending God’s truth and his Law by waging holy war on infidels. Not Good. But a sinner. The foremost of sinners.

Yet for St Paul this was **good news!** To realise what God was doing in Jesus Christ brought Paul to an understanding of himself as a sinner. The worst of sinners. But God’s **graciousness** is revealed in the **very realisation of this fact**. Not because he was good, or holy, or rich, or well brought up, or had the right ideas, the right manners, the right beliefs, the right politics, the right lifestyle, the right wife or husband, the right job.

But because he was **lost**, God himself in Jesus Christ came to find him, and to bring him home. How much time had he spent trying to measure up, trying to be worthy of the exacting God of his imagination, who required rigorous obedience to the law, in whose presence nothing imperfect, nothing unclean, nothing **inadequate** could stand. What other feelings could such an idea of God produce than a sense of angry failure, masked by an intolerance of others and a blindness to one’s own faults?

But the God who revealed himself to St Paul said, humbly, ‘Why do you persecute me?’ This God was like the father in the parable, not caring about his dignity (his purity?), not waiting to be approached with correct reverence, correct awe, correct **fear**.

He comes running when we are still far off. In the face of such patience and love, which brushes aside all malice and reproaches because of the **joy** of finding the one who was lost, forgetting all the sadness of the years of estrangement, **we know ourselves to be sinners**, to be **unworthy** of the great love and forgiveness which God gives to us. But we know that to God, like the father in the parable, **it doesn’t matter!**

God himself has come to meet us, he has restored us to our inheritance which we had thrown away, has brushed aside the apologies and excuses in the joy of finding us home.

And in the face of such acceptance, such forgiveness, we know ourselves to be sinners. **Not** with the miserable self-indulgent sorry-for-ourselves desperation which first brings the prodigal son in the story to his senses that anything might be better than the situation he had got himself into. But with the joy and amazement (Amazing Grace!) of one who was lost but now is found, and who hears God say, ‘None of that matters to me; my love has been stronger than all of that; I’m glad to have you back; I missed you; I love you. Take, eat; take, drink . . .’

We might have been happy to be servants. But God does more than we could ever ask or expect. He makes us his own beloved sons and daughters, restored to our inheritance, and heirs of his eternal kingdom, the foretaste of which we already receive in this heavenly banquet, the friendship of God and the nourishment of his very life.

As the story of our world (which is also in part the story of God) unfolds, we should be **challenged**, filled with **joy**, and with great **resolve** to make use of the ‘second-chance’ God has given us; but not depressed, because our hope has been revealed in Christ’s resurrection, and we now know that God will not leave us lost.

Sadly, our perceptions of God are often either too big to relate to, or else too small and

petty to be the kind of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and which is revealed to us in this Sunday's parables. Or else we are too busy comparing ourselves (usually favourably!) with others to even recognise that how we perceive God matters, for it is this that will determine how we see others.

The God we worship, and who calls us into his friendship and inheritance, giving us grace to grow and be free from our sins, is the God who saw us when we were still far off, and ran to meet us in his Son, who has shown us what God is like.

How can we **recapture** the power of this 'Good News', so that it is our own story, and not just a doctrine, 'out there', to be assented to like we assent to people landing on the moon—no doubt very true but what does it matter? How do we find the power of this good news when the world we knew seems to have been hijacked from us and blown apart?

One way is to **remember**. To remember the time when we felt lost, even abandoned. To remember when we felt ashamed. To remember what it was like to be forgiven by someone, with no recriminations, no questions asked; to be welcomed back, to make up after a quarrel. To remember how free we felt when we forgave somebody, or looked beyond our own concerns to help another who was hurting or in need. To remember what God has done for **me!**

For me? Was it for me? Yes, for me. For sinners like me. Even when we are still far off **Christ** comes to **us** as our food and drink to remind us that the Gospel is **our** story.

**A**s we begin to emerge from the numbness and shock of the past week, and try to make sense of it in the light of faith, we need to face squarely our own shortcomings, and also to see that there are others around us who need our help.

Unfortunately (as we know), fear and anger, hatred, and calls for retribution are the reactions of many. Fingers are pointing at Arab fundamentalist movements, and even at Islam itself.

But many leaders, including President Bush, have cautioned that Muslim people and Islam as a whole are not to be blamed for these acts. Our own Prime Minister has said the same thing. Just as Christians would disown those who commit acts of hatred and violence in the name of religion in, say, Northern Ireland, as having nothing to do with Christianity and the Gospel, so the vast majority of Muslims condemn acts of terrorism as foreign to Islam and against the teachings of the Koran.

Last Wednesday our Archbishop addressed a special service in St Andrew's Cathedral as follows:

"There are people in our community who are being harassed and vilified on religious or racial grounds. They do not deserve this, and the offenders are displaying ignorance. This will only breed further injustice. The Christian way is that of love. Let us give ourselves to that path."

Pope John Paul II said last Thursday:

"I pray that this inhuman act will awaken in the hearts of all the world's peoples a firm resolve to reject the ways of violence, to combat everything that sows hatred and division within the human family. . . Never has it been more urgent to reinvigorate the moral vision and resolve essential to maintaining a just and free society."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, and many others, while condemning the acts of terrorism,

have cautioned against blaming and vilifying innocent people.

The way to fight terror and hate is not to hate harder. Christ shows us how to overcome the power of hate, and the power of sin. He says 'love one another; love your neighbour as yourself; love your enemies. Love.'

St Augustine saw that the passing of the old familiar order was ultimately a call to build the City of God—the lasting city of God's love and forgiveness. In the same way, the terrible events of the last week are a challenge to us to bring to bear the values of the Gospel and of humanity against hatred and terror.

In our own community people are hurting. People are afraid and in hiding. Muslim men and women, ashamed of what their co-religionists may have done, and fearful of how they might be treated (**by us!**), are withdrawing into themselves and away from us.

As Christians we can make a difference. But if we wish to change anything, it is ourselves that we must first change. When we see these fellow human beings—our brothers and sisters—among us, though we may feel we are separated from them by great distances of culture and language and religion and politics, we must run to meet them, and reassure them. We must not risk losing our brothers and sisters. They must know that they are welcome to share this country which is our home.

I finish with the lines of a well-known hymn:

“God is love: and he enfoldeth  
All the world in one embrace  
With unfailing grasp he holdeth  
Every child of every race.  
And when human hearts are breaking  
Under sorrow's iron rod,  
Then they find that selfsame aching  
Deep within the heart of God.

God is love: and though with blindness  
Sin afflicts the souls of men,  
God's eternal loving-kindness  
Holds and guides them even then.  
Sin and death and hell can never  
O'er us final triumph gain;  
God is love, so Love for ever  
O'er the universe must reign.”

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