

The Father of the Fatherless

The lessons appointed for the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity: PSALM 49 AND ECCLESIASTICUS 5. 1 – 10 AT MORNING PRAYER; GALATIANS 6. 11 – 18 AND ST. MATTHEW 6. 24 – 34 AT THE HOLY COMMUNION; PSALM 128 AT EVENING PRAYER

In our lives there are watershed moments. I remember hearing the news of President Kennedy's assassination in the high school office, and September the eleventh on the radio as I drove to work at Port Hueneme's Seabee base. As the historian Rick Atkinson has said of the Second World War, our first duty is to remember. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary.

The Day the Towers Fell

On the morning of September 11, 2001, the sky over Lower Manhattan was the kind of washed blue that pilots call severe clear. At 8:46 the north tower took the first aircraft; at 9:03, the south. Above the fire in the north tower sat a single company of bond traders, Cantor Fitzgerald, at work as the world broke around them — six hundred fifty-eight men and women, nearly every soul the firm had in the building that day. Within seventy-two hours the survivors of the firm, led by Howard Lutnick, had made a promise before the whole watching world: a quarter of the firm's profits for five years, ten years of health coverage, college tuition for the children — a livelihood secured against the destitution that follows catastrophe. A trading floor, of all places, steeped in the very mammon the Gospel condemns, became an instrument of the care Scripture commands for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. *A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation*; the firm's pledge was that the fathers of those children would not be forgotten by the living who remained.

Two thousand nine hundred seventy-seven were killed in the two towers; some nine thousand six hundred more have died since of toxic exposure following the attack, and an estimated fifty thousand have sustained cancers and other conditions because of it. The wars and instability of the twenty years that followed are reckoned to have taken over three million six hundred thousand lives besides.

What Money Cannot Buy

Seen against the lessons appointed for this Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, that story reads like the practical conclusion of a single, day-long sermon. Let us take a brief look at what is set before us this day at Morning Prayer, at the Holy Communion, and at Evening Prayer. The morning lesson poses the question in the wisdom key: *man being in honour hath no understanding, and none can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him.* The twin towers proved it in an hour: no substance, however vast, bought back a single soul from the smoke that morning. Death does level all. *We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.* The doctrine is hard, but the lesson does not leave it bare; Ecclesiasticus presses it inward — *be not double-minded, neither wavering in your ways* — and our Lord gives it a face in the Gospel: the farmer pulling down his barns, choked with bounty, to build greater ones to hold his wealth, told by God, *this night thy soul shall be required of thee.*

The Cross and the Table

Yet today's lectionary refuses to end in demolition. At the Epistle the remedy arrives: *God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross*, and the hard word that no man can serve two masters, whatever the ashes teach. And at Evensong the argument comes home to the table: *blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands; happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.* The

Psalter's answer to the rich fool is not poverty but provision rightly received — a fruitful vine, olive plants about the table, wealth demoted from god to gift, enjoyed among children rather than boasted of before rivals. The blessed man does not renounce his goods; he receives them from the hand of God and holds them open. In this way he fulfils *pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father*: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from a world whose trust is misplaced.

Carried, Not Ransomed

Between the tragedy of the twin towers, the Pentagon, and the crash site at Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and our own communion table stands the one class of people Scripture never forgets. The grieving cannot be ransomed; but they can be carried. Cantor Fitzgerald carried them — not salvation, but sustenance; not redemption of the soul, but the discharge of the dead man's duties. It was the Psalm's negative and the Gospel's positive joined in one act: knowing what money cannot do, and doing with money what money ought. Six hundred fifty-eight whose labour ended at nine o'clock, and hundreds of children whose schooling did not — a witness that the love of money is indeed the root of all evil, and that money, held loosely and opened quickly, is one of the hands by which the Father of the fatherless keeps his promise: *peace upon Israel*.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, who bringeth good out of evil, and turneth even the wrath of thy children toward thy promised peace: we beseech thee to hear our prayers this day, as we remember our countrymen and those of many nations whose lives were cut short by the attacks of September the eleventh. Hasten the time when the menace of war shall be removed. Cleanse us and our enemies of hatred. Pour out the spirit of peace

and thy blessing on all Christian rulers and magistrates, and all in authority, that we may be brought through strife to the lasting peace of the kingdom of thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.