**11th September 2011**

**Psalm 139.7-12; Matthew 18: 21-35**

Ten years ago in the afternoon of Tuesday 11th September, I was visiting one of our elderly members in Kinver Grange nursing home. This lady was sitting in the television lounge with some of the other residents, most of whom were gently snoozing after lunch. The television was on and I caught it in the corner of my eye. I saw live news report focused on the twin towers in New York. They were on fire. I watched for a short while and saw repeated clips of what appeared to be a plane crashing in to one of the skyscrapers. Something serious had happened. After my visit to the nursing home I cut short the rest of the afternoon activities and returned home to find my wife nursing my six month old son, transfixed by the live events from New York.

September 11th 2001 was one of those days when people recall where they were when they first heard the news. It has been described as a day that changed the world. A day the world cannot forget. What has followed has been more terrorist attacks, two deadly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and deep suspicion between faiths and of people with faith.

This is the harvest season and general theme at this time of the church year is the relationship between God and creation. Last week w e had Paul’s saying that God is the creator of all in whom we live and move and have our being. The psalmist today states ‘where can we go to escape from God’s presence. If I were to go up to the heavens you are there, if I made my bed in the depths you are there’.

The writers of the bible of course had a different cosmology to us. They thought the earth was flat, that the sun rotated around the earth. They thought God lived just above the sky and that the stars were the peepholes so that God could look down and keep his records up o date. They also thought women were the property of men and that homosexuals should be stoned to death. They didn’t know about germs and viruses and assumed that t all sickness was divine punishment. They didn’t know what we know about how the world operated. We live in a world were space is infinite, where the idea of God who is just above the sky is laughable. Through science we have been opened up to different dimensions. God is in the eternal dimension.

Rowan Williams, the present archbishop of Canterbury, was in Manhattan on September 11th 2001, in a church very close to the twin towers. Early the next morning he was stopped by a man who it turned out was an airline pilot and a devout roman catholic, and who, recognizing the archbishop’s clerical collar, asked ‘what the hell God was doing?’ the previous morning when the planes were flown into the world trade centre.

Had he asked an Islamic jihadist he would have been told that it was Allah’s judgment on the West, its infidelities and its immoral capitalist system. A few days after the attacks Jerry Falwell and some other fundamentalist conservative Christian leaders decided it was God’s judgment on liberal America, tolerating abortion feminism and gay rights. The answer Rowan Williams gave touched on how the world God had made isn’t one where he intervenes to prevent dreadful things happening (or where would he stop?) and on how God was present in so much of the sacrificial risks taken for others. But Williams suspected that for the first time that devout Christian was having to come to terms with the fact that he was committed to a God ‘who seems useless in a crisis’.

The Sunday before 9/11 I had been preaching on the passage in the prophet Jeremiah which contrasts God to the potter and us to the clay. I had reflected on crisis of faith being a crisis in personal relationship more than intellectual doubts. Does God deserve our trust, no matter how things appear at the time? Can we trust the potter is at work somehow?

I quoted Philip Yancy, an author who had been speaking at Greenbelt that year. He had shared how on his many travels overseas he had been struck by the striking difference in the wording of prayers. Christians in affluent countries tend to pray, Lord take this trial away from me’. Yet he had heard prisoners, persecuted Christians and some who live in very poor countries pray instead, ‘Lord give us the strength to bear this trial’

He saw how, paradoxically, difficult times may help nourish faith and strengthen bonds. He had interviewed many strong stable families and asked where they had got such strength . He would often hear a story of crisis, huddling together in a hospital waiting room, waiting anxiously for some word of an errant child, comforting a daughter after a broken relationship. Relationships gaining strength when they are stretched to breaking point and do not break.

He saw that in many biblical characters they faced a turning point. Whether to turn away embittered or step forward on faith. Those who chose the path of trust we remember them as giants of faith. Others flunked it and their lives gave off a scent of sadness and remorse about what might have been.

He didn’t for one minute imply that God brought about the suffering and the trials. The work of Jesus was to bring healing, to alleviate suffering, to show love and mercy – this is what God is like. But for many people it takes a jolt of tragedy, illness or death to create an existential crisis of faith. At such a moment, we want clarity; God wants our trust. Yancy ended his talk by quoting a Scottish preacher in the last century who lost his wife suddenly, and after her death he preached an unusually personal sermon. He admitted in the message that he did not understand this life of ours. But still less could he understand how people facing loss could abandon faith. ‘Abandon it for what?’ he said. ‘You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow **must** believe it. We have nothing else’

The psalmist declares ‘even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day’.

In many ways we are called as Christians to be joyful in hope and to bear testimony to faith even in times of despair and in the face of evil. One of the most powerful and moving stories to emerge from Ground Zero was of the chaplain to the New York Fire Brigade who died when struck by falling masonry as he made his way into the wreckage of the Twin Towers to comfort and give the last rites to the firemen who had themselves given their lives by going back into the crumbling buildings. The pictures of the firemen carrying first his body from the wreckage and then his coffin through the streets of New York has become one of the most moving icons of 21st century faith.

The work of St Paul’s in New York was a striking example of that. Opening up their chapel to give food and rest to the rescue workers. They ministered to people in grief and anger. The chapel worked for reconciliation and even forgiveness.

The set gospel passage for today is all about forgiveness. Peter asks Jesus

Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times? Jesus replies seventy times seven.

How difficult this story must be for so many people. Not just the victims of 9/11 or the London Tube bombings. But the victims of Srebrenica and Dachau and the parents of Millie Dowler and the passengers of Lockerbie Pam Am Flight 103. For the victims of child abuse, medical negligence, online bullying. The list just goes on and on.

Seventy-six percent of Americans call themselves Christians. They cite forgiveness as a cornerstone of their faith and a hallmark of the work of Jesus in the world. The New Testament's messages on forgiveness are sometimes mixed: Jesus calls for forgiveness without bound ("seventy times seven," Matthew 18:22), but also forgiveness "if there is repentance" (Luke 17:3). There are sins that even God will not forgive (Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10), and on the cross, Jesus prays for the forgiveness of his attackers rather than forgiving them directly (Luke 23:34). But in spite of these inconsistencies, the general consensus is that forgiveness is a non-negotiable duty of faithful Christians

One of the difficulties with forgiveness is that in popular understanding to forgive means to forget. To treat as though the hurt didn’t happen. Those who have been training for the prayer healing ministry have been exploring this issue recently. In our biblical , reflections, to forgive is not to forget but to recognize the wrongdoing, label it for what it is and to condemn it; you can’t forgive something that isn’t wrong. Jesus didn’t die on a cross because human wrongdoing didn’t matter.

However, to forgive is to give wrongdoers the gift of not counting their wrongdoing against them. We all stand in the need of mercy. Hence the parable of Jesus in Matthew 18. We realized that forgiveness is so essential for our wholeness, healing and well being – to experience mercy as well as to offer mercy. The truth Jesus teaches in our lesson today is that unlimited acts of mercy free us all.

Collective forgiveness may have no place, because the victims -- not all Americans -- are the only ones with the ability to forgive, and the perpetrators -- not all Arabs, and not all Muslims -- are the only ones whose repentance really matters. Forgiving is in the province of the victims, but remembering is something that everyone can do.

The world will never forget 9/11, nor should it. But like other acts of remembrance, such as November 11th, reflection should lead to new hope and a better way than just retaliation and retribution.

Methodist Bishop Will Willimon recently said in the evangelical magazine Christianity Today: "American Christians may look back upon our response to 9/11 as our greatest Christological defeat ... when our people felt vulnerable, they reached for the flag instead of the cross."

The other week we looked at Paul's words on how we should regard those who harm us: "'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:20-21). Perhaps this looks too much like forgiveness, and perhaps it comes far too soon. For Christians, though, it presents a serious challenge: to stand in between, and to seek to repair the world rather than continue to strike blows against it. It is a way of remembering who we are, and who we are not. It is one way, perhaps, never to forget

At St Paul’s next to Ground Zero they share communion every day.. Michael Lapsley, a wounded healer, celebrates the Eucharist at the altar. He lost his hands in the tragedy of 9/11. Lifting the chalice to God with two prosthetic hooks for hands he rays almost daily:

Drink you all of this. This is my Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you shall drink it in remembrance of me.

Remembrance and forgiveness.

The shadow of the Twin Towers still straddles the world.

But so does the shadow of the cross. The cross has the power to heal. It has the power to restore. It has the power to forgive.

There are no easy answers. There is no undemanding road for us to walk.

May we trust in the God who is with us in the dark as well as the light the God who went to a cross and rose from an empty tomb. May God empower us all to shine with the light of the love and mercy of Christ.

The prayer of dismissal prayed at the national service of mourning at the Washington National Cathedral immediately after the attacks:

Go forth into the world in peace; Be of good courage; Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint hearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Honor everyone. Love and serve the Lord.