

## Evil Did not Win on 9/11

It's hard to believe it's been 21 years since the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Most of us remember where we were on that horrific day, as it is a date etched into all of our minds. And if you think back to some of the images of that day, you might remember one picture taken as one of the towers begins to collapse. If you look carefully, you can see what appears to be an image of the devil amidst the smoke. I remember seeing that picture during the days right after the attack, but strangely enough I haven't seen it since then. Instead, what I have seen and what is etched in my memory are many of the other pictures of that day.

Father James Martin is a Jesuit priest living and working in New York, and wrote an article about a year after the attacks. In the article, entitled "Where was God on September 11<sup>th</sup>?" he speaks of another priest who stated that when he saw the burning towers, he knew instinctively he was witnessing what John Paul II had called "the mystery of evil." Millions of people who watched TV on that day had the same feeling. And in the days that followed, the question began to be asked "where was God in the midst of all of this?" It is a fair question, but one that I think was answered in the many images to follow out of that day of the heroes of 9/11. Fr. Martin reflects on one of these images, that of a firefighter climbing up stairs with his heavy gear, while everyone else is leaving the building. Countless police officers and firefighters did just that, and why would they do such a thing? After all, isn't a stereotype that people look out for themselves, and that the self is what matters most? Yet time and time again in this country, when we encounter tragedies, we see human nature at its best. Indeed, what we see is love triumphing over evil.

That word "love" unfortunately is one of the most abused in the English language, for we get confused as to what it all means. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in his his first encyclical, "God is Love." speaks about how the Christian encounters God, citing that God so loves the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should have eternal life. And because of that encounter, the Christian is to be transformed, so that the love God lavishes upon us is, in turn, shared with others. We see that time and time again in the Scriptures, but especially in that story of the Good Samaritan. In that story, the meaning of "who is my neighbor" is transformed entirely. No longer is your neighbor just your countryman or someone in your circle of friends; here the limits are abolished, as the Samaritan helps someone foreign to him, with whom society would say he should have no contact. As the Holy Father points out, "anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor." That is the same thing we see with our God – sin has seemingly placed a big gulf between God and us, but instead God reaches out to us, showing us all how to love. Indeed, through Christ, we now are able to see the Father again, and after Christ's ascension, we are able to see God time and time again, the pope states, through the Acts of the Apostles and through the men and women who reflect his presence.

Seeing God though can be so tough in our world today. You might remember Bette Midler's song "from a distance" that was out in the early 90s. A popular song, but the theology of it really is all wrong, especially that line "God is watching us from a distance." So often that is how we associate the Trinity and indeed God: out there, far away. And indeed, that might have been what many felt on 9/11 – God is far away and removed from my life; this evil is a testament to that.

But that just is not the truth. God's love is real and alive. At times we run from that love, albeit inadvertently, by just kind of becoming resigned to the daily reports of violence and evil in the world, and take the attitude that God truly is distant. The temptation is to think yes, there is that whole Good Friday thing, but that was 2022 years ago. How about today? Indeed, because of the act of the Incarnation and because of the sending of the Spirit on Pentecost, God is alive and present. Because of His gift of the Eucharist, He is present. Because of the Sacraments, He is present. And because His Spirit is alive in people, He is present. His Spirit is what impels people to look on something like 9/11, or a cyclone or earthquake and yes, see something horrible, but also reach out and act and do all they can to help alleviate the suffering of people they don't even know, because they recognize that these people are children of God just as they are, and when part of a family suffers, we all suffer. They may not know them by name, but they know they are part of God's family, and as such they are their neighbor who we must respond to out of love.

How then do we see God's love and how do we love? At a distance, or as an immanent part of our lives? If we see God as distant and far away, then the temptation can be to turn the world into our god, following the false gods of money, power and ambition, taking the attitude that if you are going to make it through this life, the only person that can help you is yourself. Or, we can take the attitude that God is alive, and that going to Mass isn't just some going through the motions, but a sign of God's love for us in that He comes to us on that altar our of love, and then take what we receive in that Eucharist and go out to try to make God's love known to all that we encounter.

Fr. Martin closes his article with another example of how he saw God at work through the tragedy of 9/11. He speaks of how he would help out at Ground Zero, along with many other people. A ferry boat had been donated to be docked at the harbor to provide meals to the rescue workers, but he did not feel comfortable going there as he felt it would be out of place for a volunteer to go there along with the rescue workers. However after a few days, he felt like he had become part of the community, so joined the others on that boat. He speaks of that boat as something remarkable, remembering a picture from a third grader that was a message to the firefighters that read "I am sure that whatever you are doing right now you are helping someone." But what really struck him was what he saw inside the boat: firefighters eating with government officials, police offers passing sodas to iron workers, and counselors breaking bread with search-and-rescue teams, and truck drivers offering to get a cup of coffee for doctors. He calls this a "strangely beautiful sight" that gave him an image of the kingdom of God. He points out that in a place where there was so much suffering, at the same time there were people "eating together, working together, talking with one another, sharing their stories, encouraging one another, united in a common purpose of charity." Indeed, it answered the question to him of where God was in that He was present right there in that room.

Hopefully we never experience a tragedy like that again, but odds are in our world today people will choose to do something evil yet again. There just is no escaping that evil is present and a reality. But hopefully we look at that fact not with despair, but with hope, knowing that so, too, is the incredible power of God's love - a love that flows through so many of us, hard wired to act with mercy and compassion and to bring good into this world. May we truly become what we receive at Mass and never forgetting the power each one of us has to make a difference in this world and make it a better place.

God bless,

Fr. Paul