

2020 24TH SUNDAY

Friday was the 19th anniversary of 9/11- the day agents of al-Qaeda slammed jet planes into the Twin Towers in New York and into the Pentagon in Washington DC- murdering well over 3000 innocent people. It was a hate crime of enormous proportions. We, as a nation, felt great sorrow for the people of the United States.

We acknowledge that those guilty of terrible crimes should be brought to justice- and that self-defence against an aggressive enemy is legitimate. But we have to also acknowledge that some of the actions taken by the United States by way of revenge were also seriously evil.

We are told in our 1st Reading today from the Book of Ecclesiasticus: "Resentment and anger, these are foul things. Forgive your neighbour the hurt they do to you. If you nurse anger against another person can you expect compassion from the Lord?"

In Jesus- God incarnate- we have a magnificent example of heroic forgiveness.

He was in agony on the Cross- gasping for every breathe, His Body mutilated, three brutal nails holding up His entire weight. Below Him looking up with delight were a group of Pharisees, cackling with glee, whooping with unmasked hatred: "Come on Jesus- if you are the Messiah of God, come down from the Cross- then we will believe anything You might like to tell us." Such wit! Doubtlessly even cruder remarks were made, which the Evangelists have spared us from hearing.

Did Jesus curse them? Did He berate them? No, He didn't. Instead- when His end was near- He summoned all of His strength to painfully lift Himself up on the nails piercing His feet and to call out to God: "Father forgive them." And He even found an excuse for them: "They do not know what they are doing."

The Pharisees had born Jesus malice from the very beginning of His ministry in Galilee. Yet Jesus would not die until He had prayed that these same Pharisees would be forgiven by the Father and allowed to enter God's Kingdom.

The forgiveness which Jesus witnessed to throughout His life and in His dying is almost unbelievably magnanimous. We learn from Jesus' example that

it is God's nature to be utterly forgiving. It follows, then, that if we are to be at one with God in heaven, we, too, must bear no one any hatred.

At the beginning of each Mass we are invited to call to mind our sins.

The purpose of continually doing this is not to paralyse us with guilt but to remind us that we are all continually being forgiven by our gracious and forgiving God. This in turn compels us to continually forgive our neighbour. Later in the Mass we will pray: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

About thirty years ago I went with Fathers Brian Playfair and Graham Alexander to a course at Greenmeadows run by an American priest, Fr. Robert de Grandis, who at the time had a full-time ministry in healing. The lesson which I learnt from Fr. Robert was that God could not work through him to effect miracles of healing if the person being prayed for had any feelings of hatred for anyone. Before beginning to pray over anyone Fr. De Grandis first questioned the person carefully. 'Have you ever been lied about? Have you been ever deliberately hurt? Have you ever had anything valuable stolen from you? If there was a 'Yes' to any such question, Fr. De Grandis would lead the person into a prayer of forgiveness for those who had sinned against the sick person and only then would he begin a prayer for healing.

The message of the parable of the unforgiving servant is that the only obstacle we can put in the way of God's forgiveness of our sins, or in the way of God's healing graces coming upon us, is our refusal to forgive others the hurts they have done to us.

Many hurt people tell me stories of being victimised by hate-filled people. While I urge them to forgive, I also say a quiet prayer that I will always have the strength to do what I am counselling them to do.

Today, with great love and sympathy, let us pray for people in the United States- 19 years after 9/11. The memory of this day is still raw among so many of them. May they come to forgive those who wronged them so grievously.