

9/11 Ten years on

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137)

On Sunday 11th September, as worshippers gather in churches around the globe, many will be intensely aware that the date marks the tenth anniversary of the devastating terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and other targets in USA. First and foremost, this is a time to pause and remember the tragic loss of human life which ensued. Many within our own shores will mourn the loss of loved ones who were caught up these events, and of course it will renew memories of the human cost of the 7/7 bombings in London, and other terror attacks around the world before and since. We pray too for those who were left physically and mentally scarred through being caught up in these events.

Many of those who became victims of these and other attacks, did so simply through commuting or arriving at the office to begin their daily work. For others, particularly members of the New York Fire Department, it was the duties of the workplace that thrust them into the midst of danger and peril. Suddenly the routine and familiar became inextricably linked with events and struggles of global proportion.

As we pause to reflect on these episodes, we will inevitably consider how the world has, and has not changed in the years that have elapsed since. The United States has witnessed moments of great reconciliation like the appointment of its first Black President; we might also celebrate the “Arab Spring” of 2011, where many Middle Eastern countries have begun to head towards greater openness and freedom. This though has not been achieved without human cost, as events in Syria, Libya and other places continue to evidence. Yet we have also witnessed several further attacks, particularly the London Bombings which happened a few years later. This was a particular challenge when we realised that the young men who were convinced to inflict this carnage were born and bred in our own land. And of course we have stood with quiet dignity, as a painful stream of British troops have been repatriated after paying the ultimate sacrifice in the conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan.

We might also argue that those collapsing towers became a powerful and prophetic symbol of what was to come. As its name suggests, the World Trade Centre was an imposing icon of an economic system which many of us had come to believe was an unshakable and taken-for-granted foundation for the commercial life of our global village. It was not the intent of terrorists that brought this system to the tottering brink of collapse, but we are now facing an economic order which is wracked with uncertainty and insecurity.

This is a world in which, as God’s people, we are called to communicate His message of hope and Good News; it is a land that is becoming increasingly unfamiliar territory, as we navigate our way through the collapse of what we thought was certain, and confront the unimaginable. How do we sing the Lord’s song in this strange land? What is the message that we are called to bear in this midst of this troubling world, which is nonetheless God’s gift of creation and life?

These are the questions that confronted those who first uttered these words. Their certainties had been taken away; for them it was not the post-collision collapse of two giant office towers, but the fall of a citadel that was no less a symbol of their certainty and security. They too recognised the need to pause and remember their broken, fallen city - *“may our tongues cling to the roofs of our mouths”* they cried, should they ever forget to tell its story. But what was the song that they were called to sing—the Psalm ends with some of the most disturbing and horrific sentiments in the whole of Scripture *“Happy are those who repay you according to what you have done to us. Happy are those who seize your infants and dash them against the rocks.”* Yet sadly, albeit perhaps not so graphic, this was the very sentiment that lay behind the triumphal declaration *“we got our man”* as less than a year ago the death of Osama bin Laden was



celebrated by many in America.

But is this the song that we are called to sing? The song of revenge and getting even, the song of visiting upon our enemies a greater affliction than they have imposed upon us? As we pause to remember, we stand as those who are called not to pay back evil with evil. Perhaps it was deliberate that Jesus chose exactly the same syntax to announce to the world *“Happy are those who are peacemakers”*; *“Happy are those who are meek, for they shall inherit the earth”*. We might draw some comfort as we recognise that just as it was not these acts of terror which presented the biggest threat to the Western economic system, it was not these terrorist organisations that brought about revolution in many of the lands of their birth. From what we are told, the Arab spring was more the consequence of Facebook than the suicide bomber.

So what is the Lord’s song that we are called to repeat? It is perhaps best echoed in the words of a country preacher, speaking in his home town to a congregation still fuelled by dreams of vengeance and power. They still looked to God to bring about that day of reckoning for those who they deemed to be their enemies and oppressors, and must have cheered to the rafters as he announced that *“today that moment has come”*. (Luke 4:14-30)

But the *“day of the Lord”* was not to be the day when the chosen few got to get even at the expense of others, but when God would invite the whole of humanity to become the new community of His people. The radical agenda of Jesus, was one in which a religious terrorist could end up becoming one of the most eloquent writers and communicators within that Gospel people. It was to sing a song which announced good news to the poor, sight for the blind, freedom for captives and healing for the broken hearted.

Many will struggle to sing that song, many hearts will still feel very broken as memories of loved ones and lost possibilities are re-kindled. Many workplace communities will still struggle to comprehend the loss, in some cases of almost entire departments. And dare we say that many of us will struggle to sufficiently release our grip on material gain, for the poor to ever hear good news. We must sing that song gently but steadfastly, helping those who struggle to bear its sentiments, learn to slowly whisper its refrain. This land is one which has become strange beyond what many might have ever imagined, yet it is a land that yearns to hear the Good News that the Lord’s song might convey. It is the people of God who are called to orchestrate this symphony of hope and healing, and as Jesus discovered to his cost, there are many who will reject its melody. But it is the Lord’s song that we are called to sing, not the popular refrain of quick fix revenge, or that simply perpetuates unaddressed pain.

Loving God

We stand before you in the midst of a world

Where painful landmarks bear witness to our human frailty and shortcoming.

We struggle to comprehend the pain and loss of events like 9/11,

And we struggle to comprehend the motives of those who could inflict it.

Today we stand with those who mourn the loss of those they loved;

Workplace communities; families; neighbourhoods that will long bear the scars.

We pray for those who continue to live with disability and pain

And those who struggle to release their anger, outrage and indignation.

We pray with trembling lips, for those who still harbour intent to destroy human life

In service of causes, seen by them to be right;

That they may be turned from harmful resolve,

And we may have courage to ask how we could have fuelled their determination.

Help us to sing a song of peace

To find harmonies of mutual understanding and reconciliation

Help us to sing, when the melodies of hope

Struggle to be heard above the tumult of despair

May our song be always Yours

And never composed by our own ambitions and prejudices,

May we hear your Spirit’s soothing whisper in our moments of silence

And speak her healing message when our voice is found.

Through Christ, the author of all that is good

AMEN