

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you've listened to the radio this weekend, or watched television, or been on the internet, I'm sure it didn't escape your notice that yesterday was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and an attempted attack on the White House that was foiled by the passengers on one of the hijacked planes at the cost of their lives. Those of you who are older than your mid-twenties will remember it. I have different memories than most of you because I was not here in the United States when the attacks happened. I've mentioned before that our family had just gotten back to Russia two days earlier, where I was teaching in a Russian seminary. We did not get the same coverage of the attacks that you did, especially in the days and months that followed. And the internet was not what it is today. So on this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attacks, I found myself paying more attention than usual to the commemorations, and especially to the recollections of those days by people who were at or near ground zero that day. And I heard stories that I had never heard before. Particularly poignant are the stories of the first responders, especially the firefighters, who rushed into the fatally compromised towers in New York and managed to save many people before the towers collapsed around and on top of them. There were also so many accounts of people helping each other out in the days and weeks after the attacks, and I heard a number of people say that this tragedy brought the country together in a way that hasn't been the case since. There were also accounts of kindness from our neighbors, particularly the stories of flights from Europe that were forced to land in Canada. I learned that one story of a small town that mobilized itself to help house and feed many planeloads of stranded passengers has now been made into a musical. But there were other stories from those days that were not so positive. I was reminded of how the actions of a handful of extremists led many people in the U.S. to lash out at all Muslims. Compassion and self-sacrifice morphed into fear and violence for many people. In the year or so following the attacks we learned about "enhanced interrogation" techniques like waterboarding, which had been used by our intelligence services contrary to long-standing policy and the advice of experts. And then there was the decision to invade Iraq on false pretenses at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," says Jesus in our Gospel reading today. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." That is a hard saying. It was hard for the disciples to hear when Jesus first spoke it to them, and it's still hard for us to hear today. The Gospel according to Mark is the oldest of the four Gospels in the New Testament and it was written in the wake of another national tragedy, the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70, which also destroyed the Jerusalem temple. That was first-century Israel's 9/11, only it was much worse, much more devastating for them. They were occupied and oppressed by their enemy both before and after Jerusalem was destroyed, and as you can imagine, it only got worse for them afterwards.

So, these difficult words of Jesus must have seemed even more difficult in the light of these recent events. Jesus begins this section of the Gospel by asking the disciples who they think he is. Peter eventually gets to the right answer: you are the Messiah, by which he meant, "you are the king who will save us." It's clear that Peter believed that Jesus was going to be the one to drive out the Romans and bring back the glory days of the kingdom of Israel. That's why he gets so upset when Jesus announces that he has to go to Jerusalem to be put to death. He wanted revenge on the Romans and their brutal occupation. He wanted justice. He wanted goodness to be

rewarded and evil punished. All the very same things you and I want, especially when we are the victims of violence and injustice.

Astonishingly, Jesus calls Peter's reaction here – and yours and mine – satanic! Such thoughts are not the thoughts of God, but the thoughts of humans. Sit with that for a minute. Can he be serious? Are we not supposed to want to be protected from our enemies and liberated from our oppressors? Peter would have had no problem calling the brutality of the Romans satanic. Mark's community would happily call the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple satanic. And you and I might even feel comfortable calling the 9/11 attacks satanic. And I think Jesus would agree with all three. But can it be right for Jesus to also talk about Peter's desire to protect him from death as satanic? Or his desire for Jesus to become a conquering hero, to destroy Romans and bring back the good old days? Is that satanic? Would Jesus dare call our incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq over the past 20 satanic? He wouldn't dare. Would he? As you ponder that possibility, consider that even in what we call good and righteous wars, like World War II, those who fought those battles, those whom we consider among our nation's greatest heroes, have told us again and again that "war is hell." And as a trained historian, I can tell you that that hell has been an ongoing reality throughout human history. It's what we do. All of us, from the Sumerians of ancient Mesopotamia through all of the civilizations on all of the inhabited continents right up to the present. It's the "human thing" *par excellence*.

The way of Jesus that is revealed in this harsh encounter with Peter and the other disciples is something altogether different. It is a refusal to return violence with violence. It is persistence in doing good even when doing good is costly, when it requires inconvenience and sacrifice, even when it costs us our lives. I cannot pretend that I am able to do that by my own force of will and good intentions. I can only tell you that this is the alternative that Jesus proposes for our hellish history. But he does more than just propose it.

One story that sticks out among all the others that I heard over these last days was of a firefighter who was searching for survivors in the wreckage of the towers. The details are hazy. I need to go back and hear the story again. Anyway, the upshot was that after a long time of finding no one, he heard a cry for help coming from underneath the wreckage. And at that point he was faced with a heart-wrenching decision. He said that he knew that if he went into that wreckage to try and rescue this person that he was going to die. And then he had another thought: if that person was his sister or brother or mother or father that he would want someone in his position to risk his life to save them. And so he went in. I got pulled away from the story at that point and didn't even hear the ending. Obviously, he survived, because he was telling the story. But what I take away from this is that it is an excellent illustration of the way of the cross, the way that Jesus walked and that Jesus invites us to follow. This firefighter's decision is the same decision that Jesus made for us. Jesus entered the wreckage of our hellish existence to rescue us, all of us, from our captivity to sin, death, and evil, at the cost of his own life. But Jesus' goes one step further, a step that we are not able to take without him. He not only dies for us, but he is resurrected from the dead for us and now comes to us by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the gifts of word and sacrament, to open for us a new and different way of life, a life of sacrifice for the sake of others, a life of reconciliation with enemies, a life that does not cling to possessions or safety or security at the expense of others. It is not an easy way. That's why it's called the way of the cross. But it is the way to genuine, abundant, and everlasting life that begins even now in our lives on this side of the grave. And because of that promise we can begin live with our hearts set on the things of God, on compassion, faith, hope, and love. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.