

“Great Sorrow Cannot Speake”

Matthew 11
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The English poet, John Donne, a contemporary of William Shakespeare, wrote a eulogy for a young person who died suddenly which begins with these words,

*“Language thou art too narrow, and too weake
To ease us now; great sorrow cannot speake.”*

Language failed us Tuesday last. There just were no words, especially in the first days after the attack. To the extent that there was speech at all they were mostly platitudes and cliches at first. “We will go on as a nation.” “We’re more united than ever before.” “This is all just so eerie.” But mostly, there was no speech. The once noisy streets of lower Manhattan fell into a compelling silence because “great sorrow cannot speake.”

Later in the week the words would be found and there were no finer words for a grieving nation than those spoken by President Bush at the memorial service at the National Cathedral. He spoke of us being in the “middle hour of our grief.” He quoted President Roosevelt who said that “adversity introduces us to ourselves.” He said that these acts “shattered steel but nothing can destroy the steely resolve of the American people.” I think that the President’s speech will be recorded as one of the great presidential speeches of our history. It’s odd, isn’t it, how a great national crisis calls forth powerful speech from a man ridiculed for his style of speaking.

It is right and good that his speech had as its occasion a eulogy spoken to the broken heart of a great nation which discovered in an instant an unexpected vulnerability. We are, after all, the last great superpower on this good earth. And superpowers are not supposed to be vulnerable. We call the shots. We write the rules and make others obey them. We try to do that with a democratic will, but with a strong will nonetheless. A will born of our great economic, political and military power. And for all that we are, of course, envied and even hated by some.

But for last Tuesday when 18 to 20 desperate men willing to die in their desperation, orchestrated a plot so heinous that it was beyond our imagination and expectation.

People who began their days at computer terminals, who had just completed their mid-morning coffee breaks; people who began their days at airports looking forward to a reunion with loved ones; people going about their ordinary and daily tasks found themselves in the midst of a horror greater than even Hollywood could have imagined.

And here we are, at week's end, trying to contemplate the meaning of it all. Asking the perennial questions, "Why" and "Who" and "How" with a compelling urgency that many of us have had to muster up for the first time in our lives. Those who gathered at what we have come to call "Ground Zero" looking for their lost loved ones are mostly young people vastly unprepared to face these questions which have been so suddenly thrust upon them.

Why has this happened?

Who had done this to us?

How did they do it?

And behind all these questions is the God question. Where is God in all of this? Why has he lifted his protective hand from us and allowed such a horror to afflict us? Billy Graham, at the end of his long career as a pastor and preacher, admitted that even he couldn't answer that question in any really satisfactory way. And, truth be known, neither can we.

All God does in this hour is to reach out to our broken hearts and utters those words that have always been a comfort to the silent and grief-stricken hearts, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart. And you'll find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

We would prefer, I think, a God like Zeus, sitting in all his power and grandeur on Mt. Olympus, ready to strike fear in the hearts of evil doers everywhere. Instead, we meet God in Jesus Christ. A God who is meek and humble of heart, ready in every circumstance to embrace our broken hearts and lift us up. For those who died, he has lifted them up to glory; lifted them up to an everlasting life. For those left behind, God has lifted them up to great acts of courage, heroism and grace, even more unexpected than the disaster itself. This God will help us find a way out of no way, as every heavily burdened people have discovered from the beginning of time.

What has changed in all of this is the meaning of power. In Jesus Christ we have known God to be a God of power, but whose power is finally born of powerlessness. And in the power of powerlessness God confronts the powerful in the imaginations of their hearts. Jesus, in the last hours of his life, stands before mighty Pilate, with all his military and political power, and turns him into a quaking child. Unable to act as a Roman governor ought to act, he just washes his hands and walks away.

This transfiguration of power is our great lesson from all of this if we but listen with the ear of our hearts. And if we do listen, it will forever change how we view our nation. If we listen with the ear of our hearts we will discover within ourselves a nation whose greatness lies in its generosity and grace and not in its presumed invulnerability. A country that President Bush rightly called "generous and kind, resourceful and brave."

Fran Liebowitz, a lifelong New Yorker and humorist, said that Tuesday morning has forever changed the way New York understands itself. Before Tuesday we thought that the really important people in her city were the shoe stylists and the fashion consultants and the television producers and the heads of music companies and the book editors. But on Tuesday she discovered that the really important workers in New York were the nurses and the construction workers and the firefighters and the Red Cross volunteers.

There are just so many tasks ahead of us as a nation. Our hands and hearts will be filled with the grieving tasks of comforting the afflicted, especially those left most alone and lost at this horrible hour. The husband who lost both 30 year-old wife and 5 year-old child in an instant and will likely never recover their bodies to bury. No graves to visit, no concrete way to work through the rituals of grief. The loved ones who come to the homes who have nothing to say but simply to embrace.

There is the difficult and complex task of bringing those who committed this act to justice. But who are they? Why did they do this? What did they think they were accomplishing?

A young man standing at Ground Zero said, "I've got to find out why people hate us so. I've got to tell my son something." As our government moves to find the accomplices of this crime, I hope it has the grace and capacity to ask this question and find for itself a satisfactory answer. Were they acting out of some religious motive? Some hope of entering paradise? Several of them had been drinking heavily in the week before and got into a fight in a bar. Hardly the work of religious Moslems. Did they give their lives for a Palestinian homeland? If so, they completely misunderstand Palestine itself. Even Yasser Arafat expressed his profound grief and then went straightaway to a Palestinian clinic to give blood to be sent to New York City. These creatures and emissaries of hell acted in no one's interest but their own misguided sense of mission.

And ironically, we have discovered a new world unity that we never really knew was there; that the word "globalization" is not just about how our economy works in this new digital age. It's about all the peoples of this earth grieving as one people without regard to differences of language, skin color or religious belief. In the German Parliament last Tuesday, the head of the Social Democratic Party said, "Heute, wir sind alle Amerikaner." Today we are all Americans. The word "globalization" has achieved a new and much more important and powerful meaning as of last Tuesday morning.

Everything has changed. Not everything for the better, of course. We all would rather have these thousands of innocent lives back. And being on the brink of war does not bode well for our future. More lives lost on all sides of impossibly complex and mysterious battlegrounds. Will we conduct this new war as if nothing has changed? Or will we enter into this inevitable conflict as a people who fundamentally understand that we are a new people who understand our role in the world differently? Only time will tell.

It might be better for a while to accept the fact that “great sorrow cannot speak” clearly and that we should move forward courageously but carefully as God’s children trusting in God’s good guidance and all-embracing love. It might be better for us to move forward as children of God who follow his example and be meek and humble of heart even as we seek to right these great wrongs inflicted upon us. We need to come before God, as James Weldon Johnson put it, “like empty pitchers to a full fountain with no merits of our own.”

On Tuesday morning I drove out to a meeting at Pilgrim Center, our camp on the shores of Green Lake. As I was driving there, I stopped at a stop light and looked over at the woman in the car next to me. She held a concentrated gaze on the road ahead, but I could tell she was not looking at the road really. And then she brought her hand to her face and in an inconspicuous move wiped a tear from her eye.

I then realized that for one moment she was thinking the same thoughts that I was thinking. In fact, I would discover as the day wore on that the whole world was thinking the same mixture of confused thoughts I was thinking. And for one moment, the whole world was united in shock and horror and then in stages, grief and sorrow and of course, anger. For a once noisy city was reduced to an eerie silence like Bethlehem. “How still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.”

The noises of that fair city will return. But I hope that the unity and compassion we felt in this moment will sustain us into our future. And this way, these dead shall not have died in vain. And that, in the words of that other great American presidential speech, *“this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.”*

And that this government of the people,

by the people

and for the people,

shall not perish from this earth.”

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