

“For Kings and All Who Are in High Positions”

I Timothy 2:1-7
September 23, 2001
James R. Gorman

We are encouraged to read the Bible daily. And re-read it. Interesting, isn't it, that we would be encouraged to read the Bible over and over again. Often the same passages, over and over again.

When I do this I discover two things. First, I read passages that I didn't know existed. Even though in my almost 30 years of serious study of the Bible—and dragging good friends in Bible study through whole books—I must have read everything in the Bible at least once, I occasionally come across passages that look as if I've never seen them before. “That's in the Bible?” I ask myself.

Secondly, when I re-read a passage, certain words jump out at me that didn't jump out before. I may not have been in the right mood the last time I engaged the passage at hand. A stunning example of that is the first verse in this morning's passage in the letter of Paul to Timothy:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for everyone ...

I've preached on this one before. I advocated the use of the formula of prayer that I learned from an Evangelical friend of mine. It's called “ACTS”. The idea is that each prayer ought to have the pieces Adoration, Confession Thanksgiving and Supplication. I teach this to our confirmands. That's what I preached about the last time this passage came around. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. But what I missed the last time was the following prepositional phrase:

... for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

I missed this the last time around, and it didn't seem so important then, because the last time around we weren't in a national and international crisis and on the brink of wars and rumors of wars. Never in my memory have we so publically and so frequently or so powerfully prayed as we have these last two weeks. And never have we prayed so powerfully for “kings and all who are in high positions...”

Yesterday Mayor Guiliani announced that there would be a special prayer service at Yankee stadium this afternoon, hosted by Oprah Winfrey and James Earl Jones, that is to include clerics from all the Abraham family of faiths: Christians, Jews and Muslims. After making this announcement, the mayor called for questions and got this strange one. “What

good do you think will come of the prayer service at Yankee stadium tomorrow?" What purpose do you see it serving?

Guiliani seemed taken aback by the question. For the first time in these past two weeks he was at a loss for words. "Are you asking me to explain the purposes of prayer?" Finally he said that it is good and right for families who are grieving to gather in their grief with other families and with the whole city of New York and, indeed, the whole world and receive by that gathering some consolation. To feel the embrace of the whole world and the embrace of the creator of the whole world; that is the purpose of our every gathering in our grief.

Our need to congregate in times like these is manifest. The various congregations on the city streets in lower Manhattan were the most poignant, of course. People, mostly young people, watched as friends fell to their death in the twin towers magnificent in size if not beauty. Their "unignorable immensity" as John Updike wrote this past week. The congregants on the streets embraced each other and wept and screamed and stood with a stunned silence at the terrible vision from Hell.

And now they need to gather to pray. For themselves, for those who have lost friends and family close to them. For a nation that has not been invaded by a foreign enemy since 1812, when the British came up the Patuxant River to burn our Capitol to the ground. For a world that understands itself as infinitely less safe than it was almost two weeks ago.

And to pray for world leaders.

Our leaders need to be prayed for. Even those leaders of other nations, indeed even the leaders of nations who are at this moment our most bitter enemies. In Timothy's time, the kings to be prayed for were neither Christian nor Jewish. They needed to be prayed for, not only for their own wisdom and sensible reflection, but also so that Timothy's congregation might lead a "quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."

The kings of these days need to be prayed for so that they don't listen to the advice of those who counsel revenge. As President Bush said, grief turns to anger and anger to resolve, but it must never turn to revenge. In the great Shakespearian play Macbeth, one of the noblemen of Scotland named MacDuff has just gotten the news that his wife and children have been killed by murderers under the hire of General Macbeth. Duncan, the King of Scotland, was also murdered by Macbeth and his wife in a killing spree extraordinary even for those times. Malcolm, the son of the king, then counsels MacDuff, "Let us make medicines of our great revenge to cure this deadly grief."

"Let us make medicines of our great revenge to cure this deadly grief."

MacDuff does indeed take revenge and kills MacBeth by play's end and, holding Macbeth's severed head aloft, announces Malcolm the new king of Scotland. Shakespeare calls this play a tragedy, not a victory. For it is only the beginning of the bloodletting that would stain the soil of poor Scotland for many generations to come.

Another nobleman of Scotland says of his country in the middle of all this bloodletting, “Alas poor country! Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot be call’d our mother, but our grave.”

Our prayers for our kings and presidents and prime ministers and secretaries of State and Defense in our time is that they bring these agents of hell to justice, but that they do not make medicines of our great revenge to cure this deadly grief. Because grief is not in this way cured and the price of peace is not paid for by self-righteous anger, as deserving and honest as it might be.

I don’t mean to reduce this great global tragedy to my own smallness, but I just heard this past week that a cousin of mine, Donna, with whom I had just had lunch last month in Chicago, lost her husband in the dust and ashes of lower Manhattan. Donna is a lawyer in Phoenix, Arizona and her husband was visiting the firm of Marsh and McLennon in one of the World Trade Towers. This meaningless murder comes to the heartland in ways that remind us that we are not immune and Donna is not alone in her grief.

Many of you have stories like this to tell. Friends who barely escaped death or who, in fact, died. Such stories connect us to this unimaginable tragedy and allow us to congregate with the grieving. Still, I hope it allows us to pray with greater meaning a prayer of forgiveness and hope in a world that, like Shakespeare’s Macbeth, fairly screams of meaninglessness and despair.

There’s an interesting line in Macbeth that has always intrigued me. Macbeth is having second thoughts about all this murdering, and in conversation with his contract killers (the three murderers) he thinks he hears them say that one of the intended victims was really a good and loyal man. Macbeth says, “Are you so gossiped as to pray for this good man and his issue?”

Are you so gossiped? The noun *gospel* used as a verb. Have you been so shaped by this odd gospel of Jesus Christ that you would pray for your enemy? Are you so gossiped?

A hint in an otherwise hopeless tragedy that peace can emerge when we pray earnestly for our leaders that they might be able to, in turn, be so gossiped as to pray for their enemies. And in this way we all may “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity which is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires EVERYONE to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

+++