

"Rachel is weeping for her children...because they are no more"

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"Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all the region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

"Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel is weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.'" (*Matt. 2:16-18*)

This passage from Matthew is read in the Church the Sunday after Christmas. At that time of year the church commemorates the thousands of Holy Innocent male children killed by Herod. In preaching about this passage at Christmas time I have commented that the killing of the Holy Innocents is something that seems so distant from us that we do not truly realize what a terrible act it was. I have mentioned that if so many people were deliberately killed at one time in this day and age the world would be horrified at the violence and cruelty. I never expected that the world would ever witness an event of that magnitude and violence again.

Our lives now and the lives of everyone are forever changed. It is now our country's and the world's voice that is heard, with loud lamentation, weeping for those who are no more. It seems that it would be impossible for so much to change in a week's time. Not one of us could ever have imagined.

We are left in great sadness. Some have lost family, friends and colleagues. We still can barely comprehend what has happen. We look for answers. How could such a thing happen?

Let us be assured that this was not the will of God. God created us in his own image. He created humanity because God is Love. As a God who is love, creating us in His own image, by definition we were created with free will. God does not control us. We all know that we can do as we wish because we have free will. We are able to turn against God, and sometimes do. God does not will evil. God did not will this evil. Tragedy and catastrophe are not new to the world they have almost always existed. Often they are the result of human weakness and sin. Hate is a sin, hate is against everything that God is. Hate was a part of this tragedy. And now our faith will be tested that we do not return hatred for hatred.

Our Lord tells us "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." These words no doubt, now, are more challenging for us than they ever have been. But we will only be at peace in our hearts if we let God, who is love, into our hearts and accept His peace and consolation. God can and will do anything for our salvation. God can give us peace in our hearts and in the world if we let Him.

In our minds' eyes we see the planes crashing down into the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon. We see the buildings collapsing downward and imagine the humanity falling. But that was not all that was happening, something was happening that we didn't see on TV.

When that first plane crashed into the first tower, innocent souls were being received by God into eternal rest, into a place where there is no sickness, no sorrow, no sighing, but life everlasting. And the same thing happened when the second plane hit, and when the plane hit the Pentagon, and when all of the buildings collapsed, and when the plane crashed in Pennsylvania, and it has been happening all week as uncounted victims succumbed to their injuries. It has likely been happening, even while we have prayed here this morning. There was not just a downward descent. Thousands of souls were ascending, rising to their eternal salvation.

In our minds' eyes we might change the perception of the images we have seen on TV. We might try to picture what we were not seeing - Our Lord, Christ, the God who is love, with His arms open receiving those souls, at the World Trade Center, at the Pentagon, in Pennsylvania. I was talking with my young daughter about the tragedy and she said she would rather use a term other than die, or perish, or even the term we often use in the Church, "falling asleep", about those who are no longer with us. She said she would like to think of the victims as "stepping up" to an "oh so much better place" and to have an image in her mind of them stepping up, of flying up and arising to God. That is what we should see in our minds' eyes.

The families of those who have lost loved ones, those who have lost their friends and colleagues, this nation, the world, all of us our victims of this tragedy. But tragedy and catastrophe are not new to our country or to the world. World Wars and other wars and tragedies are in the memory of people standing in this church. God did not forsake this nation or any nation during those tragedies and He will not forsake us now. Christ came and suffered and died on the Cross, that we now have before us, so that we might be released from the pain and sorrow of this fallen world and have eternal life with Him. It is precisely because in this fallen world, where horrible, unthinkable tragedies like this have almost always occurred, that God "did not cease to do all things until 'He' had brought us up to Heaven." (*Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*)

We may find it difficult to see God now, but in fact we already see the face of God everywhere around us, in the way people have pulled together throughout the country, in the heroism of those who continue rescue efforts, in the messages of sincere love, condolences and support that have come from around the world. The healing will take a long time, but God is already working to heal each one of you, to heal everyone in whatever way necessary. We can be confident of this.

I began by quoting from Matthew, the reading used after Christmas, remembering the Holy Innocents. Matthew quotes from the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children, she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not." (*Jeremiah 31:15*)

Rachel is actually weeping for the northern tribes of Israel who were in exile. St. Matthew applies this to the killing of the Holy Innocents. But the next verse in the book of Jeremiah continues "Thus says the Lord; 'Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the

enemy. There is hope for your future, says the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country." (Jeremiah 31:16-17)

In the Orthodox Church we speak of our time here on earth as being in exile from our true country - the kingdom of heaven. That is what we seek and strive after. Thousands of souls have found that country in the past few days. As St. Paul tells us we must not grieve like those who have no hope. We have every hope, we know that whatever befalls us we have God's perfect and unconditional love, support and strength as we struggle to recover and move forward. We must not ever forget that, not now, not in the days, months, and years ahead. There is hope for your future, says the Lord, and your children, (and you), shall come back to their own country.

Glory Be to Jesus Christ!