

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C” *Imploring the Lord in hope and trust.*

September 10-11, 2016

Readings: Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32 (15:1-10)

The readings for today’s Mass are read in Catholic Churches around the world, yet seem almost eerily appropriate here in these United States. The Gospel challenges us to offer forgiveness on a day in which our collective memory takes us to an infamous day fifteen years ago. And St. Paul notes honestly: “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and arrogant, but I have been mercifully treated because I acted out of ignorance in my unbelief.”

I recently saw an interview with a young man by the name of Mubin Shaikh, who was brave enough to write a book<sup>1</sup> about his experience, brief though it was, as a jihadist radical. “For me I was made to feel guilty about the western lifestyle that I was living, trying to find my way, my identity, who am I supposed to be, how western am I supposed to be? How Islamic am I supposed to be? Are the two incompatible? As I tried to answer these questions, I find myself moving towards more extreme views.”

With the help of a religious scholar, he spent two years in Syria, revealing the ignorance in his earlier interpretations of the Koran. He returned home to Canada and has testified before Congress, assists security personnel even going undercover for a time. Watching the interview, it was hard to believe that this man came so close to taking up arms in the name of al-Qaida and the Taliban.

He noted the challenges Muslim Americans feel, a mix of ideology and foreign policy grievances. “It’s hard to decide who are you supposed to be. For some people in the U.S. who feel people are saying to them, ‘You’re not American. We don’t consider you American enough.’ So then they begin to look at other identities that they can latch onto to then have something, some kind of identity.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Undercover Jihadi: Inside the Toronto 18

This is a critical point to consider, because there is clearly a crisis of identity in many people today, not only amongst the young. Many no longer subscribe to a fundamental identity as a son or daughter of God, and this has consequences. Neither an excuse, nor an adequate explanation, it may be a starting point for understanding.

Like so many, I was not directly touched by September 11. I watched in horror on TV, but far from the danger. Ten years ago, while visiting a priest friend from New Jersey, I asked if he could take me to Ground Zero. He did, but only later did he tell me that this was the first time he had returned there. I was puzzled— more than five years had passed and he was right across the river. He described how he helped in the immediate aftermath, blessing the mortal remains of those who died. It was still quite raw.

Many still struggle in the aftermath of 9/11. I think about the a firefighter by the name of, Ken Zaveckas, now retired, who wrote his reflections, found on the U.S. Bishops website. He had been on loan for two weeks to Brooklyn, likely sparing his life, as the majority of men with whom he normally worked lost their lives. A total of 343 firefighters perished that day. He recalled the:

“9-, 15-, and, in one case, 24-hour straight tours, where I had the honor of supervising some of the bravest men in the world as we clawed and dug our way through what by now was a "recovery" effort. Don't ask me what we had to walk through and handle or what we had to send home to mom and dad, or the wife. Don't ever ask me.”

He like many, still suffer ill-effects from the nodules that formed in their lungs during those days. It is not over for these people. Did not remove shoes, laptops, not get to the airport nearly as soon; you could greet arriving relatives at the gate, bringing liquids onboard, body scanners, etc. It has radically changed.

Today we commemorate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a horrific day in our nation. Hatred, wrath and anger were behind 9/11, fueled by a radical interpretation of Islam. On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011, then President of the USCCB, Archbishop Timothy Dolan issued a statement which reads in part:

“... we remain resolved to reject extreme ideologies that perversely misuse religion to justify indefensible attacks on innocent civilians, to embrace persons of all religions, including our Muslim neighbors, and to welcome refugees seeking safety. We steadfastly refrain from blaming the many for the actions of a few and insist that security needs can be reconciled with our immigrant heritage without compromising either one.”

This weekend can also provide the occasion for helpful reflections on what our country learned from 9/11 and our continued response. Our nation is not unique in our historic struggles to love one's neighbor. Catholics were the victims of anti-Catholic bias in the 1850's that is well-documented. Ironically, it spurred the formation of the Catholic School system, because it was increasingly difficult for Catholic children to attend public schools.

In the space of fifty years, the Catholic population in the United States suddenly transformed into an incredibly diverse mass of urban and rural immigrants who came from many different countries, spoke different languages, held different social statuses, emphasizing different parts of their Catholic heritage. Catholic culture remained strong, vibrant and clear. Despite significant differences between Catholics and Protestants over matters of doctrine, there remained a dominant culture in our nation that was both God-fearing and that stressed traditional values of marriage and family. This is no longer the case, and there are serious issues of assimilation that present new problems.

While an attack on the scale of 9/11 has not occurred, huge challenges remain, and the reality of geo-political landscape is significantly more complicated today, leading many to feel less safe than fifteen years ago. In truth, simple answers to complicated questions of immigration reform or counter terrorism measures are not easily found.

However, we do have some control over our own response, our own ability to engage these issues in the light of our faith, including what our faith teaches about the importance of forgiveness. When we cling to feelings of hatred, we will never find peace within- it simply gets swallowed up by the anger. We do this while still acknowledging our fears and our concerns.

Today, we beg the Lord to protect us, not allowing our fears, real and justified though they may be, to cloud our better judgment. As we remain ever vigilant in the face of evil and hatred, may we truly pray for the grace of forgiveness towards all who have hurt us, just as our Lord has taught us. May God bless our families and our nation.