

Innocent Survivors
Homily preached at King's Chapel, Boston
By the Rev. Earl K. Holt III, Minister
Wednesday, September 12, 2001
Text: Matthew 2:16-23

Yesterday at Noon, Daniel Kanter rang the church bell -- the more accurate term under the circumstances was that he tolled the bell. Since it was recast by Paul Revere and hung in the tower in 1816, our bell has been sounded to mark a great many momentous occasions, not only in the life of King's Chapel, but in the nation's life as well. None, however, was more solemn than its tolling yesterday at noon, when our regular Tuesday recital was canceled, and the church was closed to tourists and as the bell announced was opened for those who desired a place to pray, in the face of a great national tragedy, and the death, by deliberate acts of terrorism and mass murder, of many, many thousands and untold grief and suffering for countless more of our fellow citizens. The long-term consequences of these acts are unforeseeable, but extremely foreboding, and we should keep in our prayers the leaders of our nation and all the nations of the world, who will be called upon to make fateful decisions in the days and weeks ahead, in what could become an escalating international crisis, with the specter of international war looming ominously the background.

I was not originally scheduled to preach today, and though I felt I had to do so, I feel at the same time at a complete loss. There are times when words, which are the preacher's stock in trade, seem utterly inadequate, and this is certainly such a time. When I turned to consult our daily lectionary, which we generally follow in this Midweek service, I found that oddly enough, as it seemed to me, that the gospel texts for this week are from the opening chapters of Matthew, the narratives of the birth of Christ. At first this struck me as not only out of season but in the fact of current circumstances positively unseasonable. But then of course, after describing the visitation of the wise men, the familiar highlight of so many Christmas Pageants, Matthew goes on immediately to describe the horrible aftermath of the glorious birth, in which Herod "in a furious rage...sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and all that region who were two years old or under...and quotes the words of the prophet Jeremiah, 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.'"

And thus in just a few verses written long ago, Matthew captures the essence of yesterday's events, the slaughter of innocents. People just like you and me, who got up yesterday, a day like any other, to go to work, just as most of us do, people who in New York took a familiar elevator ride up to their office as they had hundreds of other days, not knowing that it was the last time they -- or anyone -- would do so. Up into that high tower, that powerful monument of a powerful, technologically advanced civilization. And others in Washington, men and women, who kissed their spouse and children good-bye, never guessing it would be for the last time. And firefighters and policemen who would lose their lives trying to save the lives of others.

And closest to home for me, those who boarded planes here in Boston, for business or for pleasure, or to fulfill some pleasant or not so pleasant duty. People like my wife and my mother-

in-law who yesterday morning boarded a plane at Logan Airport and took off at 8 A.M. on a United Airlines flight, on the way to attend a family funeral. It was fortunate for me that I already knew they were safe before I learned that it was a United plane -- apparently in fact the plane in the gate just next to theirs -- which was fated to take its passengers to a fiery death an hour or so later in New York -- while the plane which my wife and her mother were on soon after would be forced to land in Detroit, far from their destination but safe and alive. So they became innocent survivors while all those others would become innocent victims, and the only difference is the plane they happened to board one Tuesday morning.

Intellectually, we all know how fragile life is and how uncertain, how vulnerable we are, but the brush of such a circumstance as this makes it frighteningly and vividly real. We truly never know what any day, any ordinary day of life, may bring forth, for good or for ill. This is true personally and it is true also on a larger, cultural scale. We live in what none deny is the most powerful nation on earth -- the last and only Superpower as it is sometimes said. A land where we are accustomed to think of ourselves as safe -- to take our security more or less for granted. In contrast to other lands we have come to think of ourselves as exceptional in this regard.

The perpetrators of this evil must certainly have been aware of what they were doing in attacking two of the most prominent symbols of our country's economic and military might, decimating the tall buildings towering over Wall Street and damaging part of the Pentagon. Because of television we have become all too familiar with scenes of mass carnage and destruction in acts of terrorism and violence all over the globe, and with the Oklahoma City bombing we learned that we are not entirely invulnerable within our own borders, not completely protected. But a relatively small building in Oklahoma is not the tallest skyscrapers in New York City, nor the headquarters of our military in the nation's capital. And this too was obviously a calculated and coordinated effort, a broad and sophisticated conspiracy which must have involved more than the few who were willing to sacrifice their own lives to take the lives of thousands, not for any immediate gain but for some ulterior motive, some ideological intention, an evil but higher purpose.

Our text serves to remind us that the slaughter of innocents is an old story, that evil is an old story. Unfortunately, as the front pages tell us today, it is not just an old story. However, the text also suggests that out of tragedy, even tragedy wrought by those with evil intent, the promise and possibility of good survives. Evil can and does take innocent victims, but evil cannot prevail unless it destroys the will and the hope of those who survive -- the innocent survivors. And if that label applies in particular to people like my wife and her mother, it also applies to each and all of us. None of those thousands who perished yesterday deserved to die any more than any of us deserve to have been preserved. The reality of evil is something we have to accept, along with the fact of our personal and national vulnerability and the limits imposed by fate, by forces beyond our control. But to live faithfully is to accept these realities and limitations and face them courageously, to overcome our fears, to do what we can in times of tragedy and to look to the future with confidence and hope for the good, still believing in God's promises.

Let not our loathing for those few who caused so much death and suffering blind us to the faithful heroism of those who yesterday willingly gave their lives in attempts to save and preserve the life and safety of others. Let not our anger and thoughts of revenge cause us to

neglect the immediate and pressing need to provide comfort and succor to the many who have suffered grievous loss and need both our prayers and our active compassion. Let us take encouragement in the thought of the thousands who have flooded Red Cross offices to give blood and hundreds who have volunteered to go to the site of the tragedy, all those who seek in this time of travail to do what they can. And let us do the same. Let us each in our own way, do what we are able to live the faith that we proclaim, living in the hope of God's promise of righteousness, justice and -- yes -- of peace.

And, much better than any of my own, may we remember the words of Abraham Lincoln, who in another time of tragedy and travail said:

"Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to end dare to do our duty as we understand it....With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds,...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."