

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 12, 2023

Remembrance Sunday

Solemn Requiem Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

Chaplain Captain Mark Winward, *USN Senior U.S. Navy Chaplain*

on

Romans 8:31-39; Matthew 25:31-46

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Remembrance Sunday Mass

I'm honored to have been asked to participate in your Remembrance Day mass at this beautiful and historic parish. I currently serve as the National Security Agency Chaplain just outside of Washington and have had the privilege of serving as a Chaplain during the last 25 years of my 37 years of commissioned Naval service.

It is personally significant to me to be speaking in this great city, since it was because of the 911 attacks that I returned from the reserves to permanent active duty. Since then, I've spent a significant number of my years serving with Marines – and with units that paid a particularly high price. On more occasions than I can count, I've had the sad duty of accompanying an officer, clothed in his or her dress uniform, knock on the door of a servicemember's family, and deliver the worst news of their lives.

Remembrance Sunday specifically honors those countless names that have been tragically uttered on doorsteps of Gold Star families who have struggled to rebuild their lives without their husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter...

Regardless of their branch of service or faith group, military Chaplains serve a unique role in ministering to those entrusted to our care. Wearing the same uniform, living under the same hardships, and enduring the same hazards as those we serve – yet while remaining unarmed – our calling makes us are no less than ambassadors of God – especially in the darkest places seemingly abandoned by God.

Chaplains draw their lineage directly from St. Martin of Tours, a soldier in the 4th century Roman army stationed in Gaul (modern-day France). Legend has it, while Martin was a catechumen, preparing for baptism, he was met by a nearly naked beggar at the gates of the city of Amiens (A-mi-yon) who asked for alms in the name of Christ. Martin, drawing his sword, cut off part of his military cloak and gave it to the beggar. That night, Jesus appeared to Martin, clothed in half a cloak, and said to the saints and angels surrounding him, "Martin, a simple catechumen, covered me with this garment." Confirmed in his faith, Martin was baptized and went on to become the Bishop of Tours, famous for his strict ascetic life. Martin had a dramatic influence on the development of Celtic Christianity – and became known as devoted missionary to non-Christians throughout his diocese and a staunch defender of the poor and marginalized.

After Martin's death his cloak became an object of veneration, frequently carried into battle. The priest who cared for the cloak in its reliquary was called a *cappellanu* (*ka-pel-la nu*), and ultimately all priests

who served the military were called *cappellani* (*ka-pel-la-ni*). The French translation is *chapelains*, is from which the English word *chaplain* is derived. Martin's life and ministry is remembered every November 11th as he is celebrated as the patron saint of soldiers as well as that of France.

Martin is remembered for beautifully demonstrating the spirit of today's gospel reading: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

The chaplains with whom I am privileged to serve – from every denomination and faith group imaginable – live into this everyday. But the same can be said of the men and women with whom we serve in the armed forces. We might imagine Jesus saying of them, "I was fearful and you gave me courage, I was oppressed and you sought justice, I was threatened and you defended the peace."

Everyday, service men and women stand between our great nation and those who would wish us harm. That freedom we enjoy this morning is in no small part paid for by wounds our veterans borne in mind, body and spirit – as well as those who have given their all. Having ministered to service men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan, I can attest that combat in a distant land represents the frontiers of faith. During OIF and OEF, a significant number Marines, Sailors and Soldiers came back in pain and despair. The fact is: the horrors of war have a way of making even those with the deepest faith feel distant from God.

In today's selection from Romans, Paul asks, "What shall separate us from the Love of God?" He never really answers the question directly, but poses a series of rhetorical questions. Those questions fly in the face of anyone who would claim faithful Christians never face trials.

Paul was writing the Church of Rome in the midst of a fierce persecution. Christians were tortured and executed for their faith in ways only limited by the imagination of their oppressors. That's what Paul is referring to when he quotes Psalm 44 in Romans 8:36, "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."

Despite the unspeakable persecutions of believers, *despite* Paul himself writing while in chains, *despite* the bleak prospects of Christianity even surviving, Paul offers hope:

8:31 "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"

8:35 "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

8:37 "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God doesn't promise invulnerability to Christians – to the contrary, God's word prepares the Christian to face persecution. But Paul is affirming the end of the story has already been written. *Despite* how bleak the situation looks in the moment, *despite* the horrors of wars or persecutions, *despite* even death itself – at the end of the story... The good guys *win*...God *wins*...you and I *win*...

That's why Paul writes just a few verses earlier in Roman 8:28, "...all things work together for good..." That's usually where most people stop, but that's not the whole verse. The whole passage is,

“...all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

Paul doesn't claim all things *are* good. Paul is affirming that God conspires to bring about good – even in the most outrageous circumstance – for those who: A - Love him, and B – Have been called by His grace.

Every time I think of this passage – perhaps my favorite in all of scripture – I'm reminded of a Gunnery Sergeant I met at then Bethesda Naval Hospital (now Walter Reed). In 2010, while I served with 5th Marine Regiment at the height of the war in Afghanistan, the Marines experienced the highest number of casualties they had since Vietnam. At one point, our regiment's Marines filled out an entire wing at Bethesda. Now these were young, ambitious, athletic men with their lives ahead of them – most of whom had lost one or more limbs in combat and, justifiably, were feeling pretty sorry for themselves. There was one Gunnery Sergeant who had stepped on an IED and lost both legs in Iraq – one above the knee and the other all the way up to his glute. Despite having literally lost half his buttocks in combat, somehow the amazing staff at Bethesda figured out a way for him to walk again with the aide of prosthetics

After he recovered, he made it his personal mission to regularly go into the hospital and inspire these young, wounded Marines to keep fighting to recover. His dedication and commitment to turn such tragedy for good offered those Marines desperately needed hope inspires me to this day. Bad things happen to good people – sometimes because of bad people and sometimes because we're just at the wrong place at the wrong time. When that Gunny zigged when he should have zagged and stepped on a mine, his life was forever changed – and a range of possibilities opened up – most of which were bad. But out of the range of tragic possibilities birthed in that moment, there was thin sliver of something extraordinary that never would have otherwise been possible.

When a tragedy occurs, like the wounded warriors I've known over the years, we're faced with a range of possibilities we would otherwise never encounter. Many of those possibilities are terrifying – but perhaps a thin sliver are extraordinarily good. Now I'm not suggesting for one moment that God desires anyone to have tragedy befall them. In fact, I think it would have been obscene for me to suggest anything like that to the young Marines I visited at Bethesda. But I am suggesting that when we're faced with tragedy, we look beyond it for deeper meaning.

If we trust against all odds, against all reason, that somehow God will bring about good from even the most tragic circumstances, it has a subtle pull on our lives. And practiced over a lifetime, like a slight course correction of a vessel on a long voyage, it can have a dramatic effect on where we wind up at the end of our life's journey. And it allows God the freedom to turn even the most outrageous tragedy into something extraordinary.

Paul's bold statement in the midst of outrageous persecution – that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose – is *radically* good news. Despite how dark things look: God loves you, God is in control, and, in the end, God will conspire to bring about good.

God's invitation to embrace hope is here – but the choice is in your hands. Paul never *directly* answers what shall separate us from the love of God. But his implication is pretty clear: So what can separate you from the love of God? I have to conclude, the only answer is 'you'.