

Twenty-Five Years after 9/11: Strangers, Neighbors, and the Work of Solidarity

The Rt Revd Dr Rowan Williams | Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue | October 14, 2026

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Well, good evening everyone. It's an enormous delight to be with you on this occasion. And I want to begin by thanking the Rector of Saint Thomas, Fr Carl, Fr Luigi, Bishop Matt, Bishop Allen, and all others who've helped to make this possible. It's a pleasure and a privilege to be back in this wonderful church, and also this evening to meet again with so many friends. They say that when you are drowning, your entire life goes before your eyes as you're submerged. I felt a little bit like that this evening, but the particular bit of the past that, of course, is before the eyes of many of us is what happened 25 years ago, on September the 11th. As you've been reminded, the day after I was supposed to give the Hobart lecture at the cathedral, and before that, I was invited to celebrate the Eucharist in the cathedral.

I've never forgotten that, as the deacon brought me the gospel book after reading the gospel, she held it good old fashioned style for me to kiss. And as I did so, her finger pointed to the rubric in the book, which said, here they may follow a sermon. I hadn't intended to preach, but for reasons which I think you'll understand equally I felt I couldn't refuse to preach on that occasion, and the text that immediately came into my mind was from the Epistle to the Ephesians: "He has broken down the middle wall of partition between us. Those who are far off have been brought near". Because one of my first thoughts on the evening was that we here in New York had experienced something of the horror, the panic, the insecurity, the helplessness that was the lot of so many across the world.

A certain kind of wall had been brought down. We had been brought near to the experience of those we wouldn't meet, didn't know. And briefly, I hoped that that sense of a wall coming down might somehow lead to some deeper awareness of global solidarity and unity. Some sense through the terrible suffering inflicted on this city, still such a nightmare recollection. But somehow, through this, we could understand more deeply the fragility that we shared with the globe. I think it can be said that in the 25 years since, there has certainly been a continuing collapsing of the distance, a drawing near, but not quite in the way that I'd hoped and prayed for, and that I think many had hoped and prayed for. We live now more than ever in a deeply entangled world. A person may be attacked on the streets of Manchester or Manhattan because of something happening in Gaza. A conflict may be initiated in Iran because of the complications in the diplomatic relations between the United States and Israel. North Korean soldiers fight in Ukraine. White South Africans are encouraged to emigrate to the United States. And so it continues.

Equally seriously, the energy consumption of the Western world continues to drive in environmental degradation in Africa and Asia. Viruses travel more freely than humans between many countries, and levels of displacement across the world are perhaps at unprecedented levels. And all this without even beginning to talk of the way in which artificial intelligence continues to collapse certain kinds of difference and distance in ways that we might say are not unequivocally good news.

25 years in which the world has become more entangled and yet not more connected. In which the world has become more porous, experiences and crises leaking from one context to another. And yet in which what I'll call the work of recognition does not yet seem to have advanced noticeably.

So what might have become a moment of mutual recognition, a moment of opening has so often been a trigger for denial. A particular kind of denial, a denial which assumes that it's possible for us to isolate ourselves from the experience of the rest of the human race. If we face global crisis in the West, our first challenge, our first duty, is to protect ourselves as much as we can, as if it were in fact possible to be isolated in this entangled world. If only global challenges could be shut out as definitively and violently as global strangers on our doorstep. But while global strangers may be excluded, sadly, environmental challenge and global pandemic do not need to carry passports. They slip across the boundaries with sinister ease and with the effects that we've become familiar with, especially in the last six years.

Like it or not, we are mutually involved. Like it or not, the crises and the challenges that we face here are not separate from those faced elsewhere. And that means to that we are incapable of being secure unless our world is secure. It's been said sometimes that peace is indivisible. So surely its security. And the idea that one nation or civilization can guarantee security for itself, never mind what happens to anyone else ought to be self-evidently an illusion. Sadly, it's become a more and more popular mythology in the last few years, and we might return to that later. But if it's true that there is no security, that is not at the end of the day, everyone's security, then we have two choices.

We can take refuge in protectionist denial and continue to manufacture and circulate the mythology that we can be safe, while strangers don't need to be attended to. Or we can embark on the risks and the labor of negotiating and planning on the basis that we recognize one another, that we recognize in one another the same fragility. The same insecurity and vulnerability, the same needy humanity that we know in ourselves. And that level of deep mutual recognition is where solidarity begins to come alive. As I've said, we are entangled with one another, whether we like it or not. Solidarity is a fact about us. But solidarity is also an invitation and indeed an imperative. Solidarity is something into which we have to live, which we must explore, develop and consolidate. Solidarity in the sense of the recognition in one another that we share a common crisis, and so a common invitation.

And from the Christian point of view, solidarity is the basis, the minimal basis for that deep and active mutuality, that deep mutual life giving that we call communion. Communion, which is the very heart of a Christian ethic.

But I want to turn now to one particular aspect of solidarity. Something I've explored a little bit in the book you've heard mentioned, but which I think deserves a great deal more reflection than I gave it there back in the 1980s, when the great solidarity movement in Poland was beginning, which was, of course, the beginning of the end of the communist regime in Poland.

A Polish priest and philosopher, Józef Tischner, delivered a number of powerful addresses in sermons, and wrote several articles on the ideal of solidarity. He acted indeed as a kind of informal chaplain to the trade unionists who were developing the Solidarnosc movement at that time, and he associates with the ideal of solidarity, something which perhaps we don't immediately think of.

For solidarity, he says, you need a common task. If you're developing a common task, you need common trust. But, and here's the key extra element to develop common trust, you need what he called a shared fidelity, a faithfulness to one another. Without the sense that my neighbor is committed to me, I'm not going to trust. I shall be ready to see betrayal all around. We all know this in varying degrees in our individual lives. We are all of us in some degree afraid of abandonment. But

it's not only individuals who experience the terror of abandonment. Nations, races, classes, all kinds of groups are locked in that fear of abandonment, convinced that their neighbors are not invested in them, that nobody would really notice if they weren't there.

To touch too briefly and with some trepidation on one of the most neuralgic issues of our time, one of the facts about the tragic and fearful conflict in the Middle East is that at its heart lie two communities, Jewish and Palestinian, both of whom are convinced with reason that perhaps the rest of the world would not mind very much if they cease to exist. And when that level of mistrust and alienation is real, it's not entirely surprising that murderous, insoluble, unforgivable violence results. It's a phenomenon visible in nations. It's a phenomenon visible within nations. There are communities within nations equally convinced that they would not be missed if they were not there. And that could be ethnic minorities of different sorts. It can be workers of certain kinds. It can be whole generations of people who have grown up in a world of secure work and stable families and suddenly find themselves adrift in a post-industrial economy with fragmenting social norms.

Such people who feel betrayed and abandoned have some reason for concluding that their society as a whole does not want to give them any stake in it, and that they have no stake in the survival of such groups. The great feminist critic Judith Butler has written about what they call grievability. Recognizing human dignity is recognizing that the loss of a life is worth grieving. If we have substantial parts of a population who believe that they are not grievable, they are not worth grieving over, once again, we have a recipe for violent alienation. People who are experiencing not being grievable, don't believe that they are the objects of commitment on the part of anyone else. They don't believe that anyone is going to be faithful to them. And that sense of betrayal, the breaking of a covenant, entails a deep wound, a deep damage to the health and the trustfulness of a society. It breeds profound cynicism.

It contributes to the rise of aggressively identitarian politics. I need to insist again and again on who I am and who we are. Because you don't care. Do you? And the question, therefore, is not only how do we understand the other or the stranger, the question is, what must I do to let the other know that I am genuinely invested in their existence and their well-being. What do I, what do we as a majority and establishment, whatever - what do we do to assure the others that they matter to us? How is that to be shown? And that's not a matter of simply abandoning one's own interest, one's own identity. And as some ethicists would like to say, being totally consumed by attention to the other. No, we remain ourselves, and we don't have to be ashamed of that. But in remaining ourselves, can we still communicate an acceptance that the existence and the well-being of the other is our concern?

Can we still communicate that a wall of division has genuinely come down, and that a distance has been crossed or overcome? That question is, of course, deeply antipathetic to the world we are so familiar with at the moment, the world of total and sterile standoff, the world where everything is determined by the binary of winners and losers. It's a model which requires the taking of time and the taking of risks. And as you may have noticed, our culture is not particularly fond of either taking time or taking risks.

So that scriptural text from which I began, about the breaking down of walls of partition and the distant becoming near, that has to do with the recognition that the life of the distant, the life of the strange, is in fact bound up with my own interest, my own well-being, my own survival. And that is a politics, whether domestic or international, a politics of faithfulness.

A politics in which all citizens and all strangers alike receive the message that their neighbors are invested in them, that their society is invested in them, that there is faithfulness to be trusted, that there is someone simply there for them. But there is no group and no individual that we are entitled

to forget, whose interests are simply dispensable or forgettable. No group, no individual who is not grievable. And that notion of grievability, the immediate and acute sense of what a loss would mean, that, of course, doesn't apply only to our relations as human beings with other human beings. What might we say about our vocation to be faithful to our environment? What is it to live as if we were promised to committed to the earth that we share?

If faithfulness is a central aspect of our acknowledgment of moral involvement with human selves and with the sources of their life, then to be involved in, to be invested in the stranger, the other is also to be invested in what gives life to the other. As to me, the world we share, we talk perhaps a bit more than we used to talk about what it is to be faithful to rather strange idea - faithful to future generations. What is it to be faithful to our great grandchildren? It's to be invested in their well-being in such a way that we take care of the sources of their life and their health. If I may divert for a moment to local matters back at home some years ago, the devolved government in Cardiff, the Welsh Government, passed a Future Generations Act, the first country in the world to do so. Of which I'm reasonably proud. This legislation required that in the future, any laws passed by the Welsh Government, by the Senedd in Cardiff, should, in the process of their refinement and discussion, take into full account the impact on future generations of what was being decided. But that should be a legal requirement. Implementing this, of course, is not straightforward and nobody expected it would be, but I would dare to suggest that it's an interesting, perhaps valuable instance of what kind of concrete action might be involved in working out fidelity, not just a society as it is, but a society as it might be. We're talking about faithfulness in terms of acting so as to secure patterns of durable use for the material world. Durable, sustainable forms of living within the world, so that the human beings to whom we are committed, to whom we are faithful, may be able to rely on a nurturing, feed literally feeding material world around them.

And all of that, I would suggest, is deeply bound up with some of the biblical perspectives on our relation with the rest of the world that we find from Leviticus through to Saint Paul. The world, we're told in Jewish Torah, the world, the earth is lent to us, not as a possession, so that we simply say to God, thank you very much, and take it away and do what we like with it. The world is given so that it may be thankfully and creatively returned to its maker, having been helped to flourish. Famously, when Moses lays down the regulations for the Jubilee in Torah, he says that to sell somebody a piece of land is to sell a series of harvests - not to sell a thing, but to convey for a limited period a set of processes in which the land can live and flourish. Can we disentangle the idea of our use of the world from an idea of possession of the world? A use which allows us to give back what we have been given, nurtured and enhanced? There, I think, are some of the foundations for the theology of the environment that we desperately need to refine and deepen as the years go by.

But behind all this talk about fidelity, of course, is for religious people of a certain kind, especially Christians and Jews, behind all this is a model of divine fidelity, divine commitment. Both the narrative of Scripture and the sacramental practice of the Christian community are fundamentally and centrally about commitment, about faithfulness. The scriptural story is about covenant, about binding commitment, God's covenant with the people, the people's uneven and often unfaithful response, which yet does not destroy the divine commitment out of which it springs.

The sacramental practice of the church declares that God will turn up when God's people meet, even if not all of God's people turn up. The sacramental practice of the church declares that God's will to be with us: "Behold, I am with you always to the end of time". God's will to be with us cannot be deflected, so that when we come in average confusion and sinfulness to Holy Communion, our average confusion and sinfulness does not prevent God from being there day by day and week by week. We read the Bible and we celebrate the sacraments so that we may be reminded that God is

faithful, that God is invested in us. God is involved with us by divine decision, by free gift. God is involved with our growth and our well-being as human beings. “How can I give you up?”, says God in the prophecy of Hosea, “I am God, not human. Humans give up and God does not.”

But that means that we reading our Bibles, celebrating our sacraments, we become, whether we like it or not, signs of that divine fidelity. And somewhere near the heart of the church, is that capacity, that calling, that impossible challenge to model the fidelity of God in the changing world. When Jacob wrestles with God or the angel of God in Genesis, he says, you remember, I will not let you go until you bless me. And that says something about the nature of our faithfulness. To discover the blessing that exists even in struggle. To discover what does not disappear, go away, withdraw in disgust in the face of failure. “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” “Until you bless me” is something which, in our conflicts and our struggles and controversies within the church, we might very well remember more frequently than we do.

And of course, in the scriptural story, that extraordinary narrative of Jacob wrestling overnight leads instantly into the story of Jacob's reconciliation with the person he has most deeply injured and betrayed. And to whom he says, when I see your face, it is like the face of God. So the church needs always to be reimagining the good news that it shares in terms of divine faithfulness. The divine desire and decision not to be without the world.

At the end of third of Marilynne Robinson's great Gilead novels, *Lila*, we listen to Lila reflecting on her life and her unwillingness to go to heaven without all the people who have shaped her life to be what it is. The assorted figures we've met during the novel, many of them violent, disreputable, ungodly characters, but all of them woven into Lila's life, she says herself. She cannot imagine going to the presence of God without them, and then imagines the crucial next step. So can I imagine a God who would say yes to me without saying yes to them? That's the God who cannot be without, whose commitment is eternal and unchanging. If that is the God we worship, and if that's the God we listen to, and indeed the God our eyes have seen, their hands have touched Jesus and His sacramental presence of the Eucharist. If that's the God of our own faith, then distance is finally not an option. That's why, indeed, the wall of partition has been broken down. And unless we see this and learn to live more deeply and consistently with it, it will go on taking nightmare disasters to make us see the cost of keeping our distance.

Again and again. We are reminded these days that so much of the evidence we need is there. Whether it's about the risks to our environment, the risks of artificial intelligence, the risks of global pandemic. The evidence is there. And yet it's only when some apparently unpredicted but not unpredictable disaster strikes that we recognize what has happened. There were people well before the Covid pandemic who were predicting the nature of the next great global health crisis. What does it take to open our eyes? It seems as if the choice lies between conversion and disaster.

In the face of this, what is the church's job? I would say fundamentally and centrally, the church's job, unsurprisingly, is to be faithful, to be faithful to, in the words of God, to the prophet Jeremiah, the city where you are sent to show, in relation to communities and persons around, the quality of costly commitment to manifest, that we are there for the neighbor, there for the neighbor, because the neighbor is not just someone existing in casual proximity to us. The neighbor is someone who gives us life again and again. When I go back to the parable of the Good Samaritan in the gospel, I am struck by the fact that Jesus challenged to define the neighbor, defines the neighbor as the one who shows mercy. I love the neighbor because the neighbor saves my life. I don't look around and find suitable candidates for neighborhood on whom I can bestow my beneficence. The neighbor is the one who saves my life.

So the church reading its Bible, celebrating its sacraments, the church is there to go on telling itself and the world, all of this in a world apparently determined to retreat into distance, alienation, suspicion and hostility, in a world like that, a world retreating into death. We are here to speak about the breaking down of a dividing wall that brings life, not the breaking down of a dividing wall that brings instant success or even happiness, but life. The possibility of true connection, the possibility of mutual life giving. The possibility of a peace that is not static but exists constantly in the giving and receiving of gift. That's the world into which we have been called.

A world where the breaking down of barriers is something which, with all the horror, with all the insecurity, that experience has brought, a world in which the breaking down of barriers becomes the gateway to something else, to solidarity in the first instance, to mutual recognition. But ultimately, that profound communion in which we take full and joyful responsibility for one another, building each other up in the body of Christ. And for that we pray constantly that the spirit may open our eyes to what is needed for the work, the labor of mutual recognition that we see in one another. As Saint Anthony of Egypt apparently said, we see in one another what it means to say that our life and our death are with our neighbor.