

*The following is the text of Father Fraser's homily on Sunday, September 11, 2005.*

## God's Grace

It is an interesting coincidence that we have St Matthew's account of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness as our Gospel Reading on this the fourth anniversary of 9/11.

One of the many things that the events of 9/11 brings home to us is that we live in a world that is in the midst of a violent and now even deadly "culture war" as the sociologists are calling it. This is a war between those who stand—at one extreme—for freedom and independence with no restricting boundaries on the individual and those—at the other extreme—who stand for respect for authority, tradition, and structure with the values and stability of the group taking precedence over the wishes and independence of the individual.

This is truly a world war. It transcends nationality, race, religion, gender, culture, geography, economic status, and class. And it affects all types of institutions: governmental, academic, religious, medical, economic, and social.

In this world of conflict in which we live, the question of forgiveness takes on an even greater significance. In response to Peter's question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus replied, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven," which is a figure of speech meaning an infinite number of times.

Jesus goes on to tell a parable, the point of which is that if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us. This is quite important. What are other theological issues that come out of the events of 9/11?

I think most of you have heard me say time and again that historically there are two basic Christian theological traditions in the West: the Patristic (or Early Christian) and the Medieval.

- Early Christian theology has the Incarnation as its foundation and framework. It has been called

"bright side" theology, or theology which sees the glass as half full. Its emphasis is on God the Son coming into time-and-space to complete and perfect God's creation: to make a fundamentally good thing better. This is the Eastern Orthodox, the normative Anglican, and now the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic theological tradition.

- Medieval theology, on the other hand, has the Atonement as its foundation and framework. It has been called "dark side" theology, or theology which sees the glass as half empty. Its emphasis is on Jesus' atoning death on the Cross to save a sinful and lost humanity. It has often emphasized the sinful and depraved nature of humankind and the eternal punishment in hell awaiting the unsaved. This has been the conservative Protestant and pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic theological tradition.

One of the characteristics of us human beings is that—especially in a time of crisis—we tend to carry things to extremes and thus to their logical absurd conclusions. Atonement-based theology can result in an unhealthy obsession with sin, depravity, and punishment and can heretically teach human worthlessness and manipulative guilt. Incarnation-based theology can lead to a trivial "Christianity-lite:" a Disney World theme park religion that does not deal with evil, sin, and the very real harsh realities of life.

Anglicanism always proudly proclaims its vision of theological "balance." And while that is a wonderful goal, if truth be told, we like Christians everywhere all-too-often fall short of maintaining balance. In a time of crisis in particular we all need to seek God's Truth, not the defense of partisan positions.

What does the Christian faith have to say to us in times when we are facing evil and the harsh realities of life? We are utterly dependent on God for all things. Despite what the popular culture tells us, we are not in charge in the final analysis. God is, thank God.

As St Paul reminds us, when we will but let Him, God can and will bring good out of any situation no matter how horrible it may be and hopeless it may seem: “in everything God works for good with those who love him...”

One Anglican theologian, Dr J.I. Packer, has pointed out that in difficult times, one good God can bring out of the situation is our growth in grace. Grace, he says, is God’s love in action toward His people. Grace means God moving heaven and earth to save us.

The primary purpose of grace, he says, is to restore our relationship with God and renew our original God-given nature, which makes us capable of—and actually leads us into—love, trust, delight, hope, and obedience toward God. This is what grace effects: and

even deeper knowledge of God and an ever closer fellowship with Him. Grace is God drawing us closer and closer to Himself. (Can you think of a better place to be when life becomes difficult or things appear hopeless?).

This growth in grace is something we all-too-often are not open to until we encounter situations which are simply beyond our control and tragedies, in the face of which, we have a sense of our own helplessness.

Our God is a God who restores. And in a time when we are faced with the harsh realities of life, this is a promise on which you can I can depend.