

Bishop's Homily
SPECIAL MASS for VICTIMS OF HURRICANE KATRINA
& 2005 Commemoration of 9/11
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament – September 11, 2005

“What went wrong?” This is a question that is being asked in the press, on talk shows, as well as in private discussions. It is a question that was also on people’s minds after the September attack on the United States in 2001. It is a question that is very much in public debate today, following in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. “What went wrong?”

The question comes out of a sense that disasters (whether perpetrated by human beings or caused by nature’s course) ought not to happen to us. We Americans tend to consider ourselves quite invincible. It is difficult for us to accept that we just might be as vulnerable as anyone else on the face of this earth.

Our vulnerability disturbs us. It makes us uncomfortable. We look for answers. And, so, we seek to place blame on structures, institutions, and persons.

However, there are events that are beyond our capability of predicting. And, there are catastrophes that are beyond our ability to prevent. This is true, no matter how much we depend on our own human knowledge and on our own human strength. May I suggest that we may just be depending too much on our own human resources, which are infinitely insignificant in respect to the total reality of existence.

The fact of the matter is that we are not God, a fact that appears to elude us so easily. But, even then, it is not God that perpetrates difficult times upon us.

God is not to be blamed. His intention has been that we live in harmony as brothers and sisters on this little planet called earth. We are the ones who have rejected that idea as unworkable. God is not to be blamed. He has entrusted to us sufficient knowledge of our surroundings to provide for our needs. We are the ones who do not use that knowledge appropriately. We have not learned our lessons well.

It, then, comes down to us as human beings and our relationship with our Creator. These very difficult lessons that we have had to face this year and in 2001 ought to remind us of our destiny to be one people of God. The sense of being in it together became extremely strong following nine-eleven. And, I suspect that it is becoming so now in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Unfortunately, that sense is usually short lived.

In a real sense, and at this point in time, it is not so important to know how we came by the lesson; but, rather, will we learn anything from it. What matters the most now is what we do in this time of the aftermath.

Even the Scripture readings for today are lessons for us. The one from the Book of Sirach calls us to act toward others as we expect God to act toward us. But, we know that. The Apostle Paul's letter to the Church in Rome teaches us that we belong to the Lord and all of our actions ought to reflect that fact. But, we have been taught that. The Gospel passage according to Matthew reminds us that our debt to God is so much greater than what we can pay or what anyone else might owe us. But, we forget that.

The sign of a good disciple is one that puts what he or she has been taught into practice. And, that is why we are here, to respond to the Lord, Who just may be trying to get our attention.

First, our response must be one of gratitude. We in this portion of the Lord's vineyard have been spared, --- weather-wise and otherwise. I think of what might have been if United Flight 93 had fallen onto Johnstown or any other community within our Diocesan Church over which the plane flew on its way to Washington, D.C.

Second, our response must be one of petition to the Lord for those who suffer, who have been displaced, and who have been exiled from their homes, - especially those who have lost loved ones.

Third, our response must be one of sharing our resources, as well as ourselves to the extent that we are able to do so. We need to remember the members of our National Guard, some from our midst, who are extending the Lord's consoling hand to those whose lives are in devastation and chaos. And, we need to be generous with our finances that ultimately belong to the Lord.

Fourth, our response must be one of reformation in terms of the values and priorities that guide the way that we live. These days are reminders that those flimsy foundations can be gone overnight. And, when that happens, all we have left is ourselves, our God, and those who are called to act in his name.

“We give thanks to God whose power is revealed in nature, and whose providence is revealed in history.” Those obligated to pray the Divine Office have this as one of the intercessions for Sunday Evening of the Third Week. I think that it describes our situation in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. “We give thanks to God whose power is revealed in nature, and whose providence is revealed in history.”

Indeed, nature has revealed God’s power. (It also showed the inability of humankind to predict and to control.) May history, now, show his providence, of which the Lord has called you and me to be an integral part. We are very much a part of his story.