

Pentecost 18, Proper 20, Year C, 2013
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It was one of those stories
that doesn't quite make the New York Times,
at least, not by early this morning,
but was at the top of my Facebook feed.
Fifty two people killed in a suicide bomb attack
as they left church in Peshawar in north west Pakistan, close to the border with Afghanistan.
There are only about 100,000 Christians in that part of Pakistan,
out of a population of seventeen million,
mostly unskilled, poorly educated, and economically poor.
Yet the church there has been a leader in caring for Afghan refugees,
and in providing care for people with leprosy, intellectual and physical disabilities,
and HIV/AIDS.
But they have to keep a low profile
in a country where they are seen as heretics.
And today
it cost many of them
their lives.

Hearing the story of those Christians in Pakistan
makes the words today from our epistle
come alive.

“First of all, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.”

For the Christians in Pakistan,
the stability of the government
might be the difference
between life and death.

Having leaders that defend the rights of their people
to religious freedom,
that provide a secure environment,
that do not tolerate violence
is what makes it possible
for them to live out their faith.

But even then, it has taken just one suicide bomber
to bring fear and death
into their midst.
Their faith
could cost them their lives.

It's the same in other places in the world.
Just yesterday,
at least thirty nine people were killed in a terrorist attack in a mall in Kenya.
The terrorist group is thought to be Al-Shabbab,
a militant group that is also held responsible for a number of attacks on churches in eastern
Kenya.

Paul writes, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for
everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable
life in all godliness and dignity."

And in the town of Maaloula in Syria
a proposed UNESCO world heritage site
where the Christian population still speaks Aramaic, the language that Jesus most likely spoke,
most Christians have become refugees.

One resident, Antoinette Taaleb, who is now staying in Damascus, had three members of her
family killed in the fighting between government and rebel forces.

She said, "We were woken up in the morning by their 'Allahu Akbar' shouts. We closed the
doors, and we gathered all in one room. They broke into the garden and told us: 'Surrender and
we won't harm you.' Antoine, Mikhael, and Shadi went there and surrendered. I heard my cousin
outside saying that he never held weapons. I understood they pointed their guns at them. Then
they started shooting and throwing mortar bombs into the room. I got injured in my chest and
elbow."

Paul writes, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for
everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable
life in all godliness and dignity."

Today's reading from chapter two of the first letter to Timothy
focusses on prayer.
It's advice about how,
as Christians,
we are to pray.
But it comes from a very different situation to ours.

Timothy
and the Christians in Ephesus
are a minority.
There is a new religion,
and they relied on the religious tolerance of the government and local leaders
to survive.
You might remember
that Ephesus was the site
of a major shrine to the goddess Artemis,
and when Paul visited there,
the silversmiths who made and sold small silver replica shrines
saw this new faith
as a threat to their livelihood.
So they got together,
and stirred up the crowd,
and started making accusations
against the Christians.

But in the middle of the riot,
the town clerk stood up
and urged the silversmiths and their supporters
to think carefully about what they were doing,
and if they really had a complaint,
to go through the court system.
But until then
they should leave,
and save themselves the trouble
of being themselves taken to court
for rioting.

Paul knows the difference
good government can make
to the early Christians' freedom to worship.

For us,
the connection is less clear.
We do not, usually, fear that the instability of our government
will result in us being unable to worship,
unable to live out our faith.
And in fact, the first amendment
enshrines our right
to freedom of religion.

But that doesn't remove the command
to pray for our leaders.
Because it's not just about us.
You've heard the saying,
"When the US sneezes the world catches cold."

What happens here in the United States
has a huge bearing
on the rest of the world.

Sometimes
the effect is direct.
Whether we choose to intervene directly in Syria
or to help arm the rebels
or just to sit back and watch
will make a difference
to those Christians
in Maaloula.
Our military intervention in Afghanistan,
and the decisions our leaders make
as Afghanistan seeks to transition to democracy
affects what happens in Peshawar
which is only 140 miles from Kabul
and which is home to something like a million Afghan refugees.

Our President,
with his family ties to Kenya
has a key role
in encouraging the stability of that country.

We need to pray for our leaders
and the decisions they make - especially in a time like the present,
when Congress seems to be struggling to govern
and the government
is once again in danger of shutdown and default.
And if that were to happen
it would have ramifications
around the world.

"I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."

But the reason given in Timothy
for praying for our leaders
is not simply
so the Christians can live peacefully
and worship freely.

Above all,
it's because God
is a big God.

Actually, it doesn't say exactly that.
What it says is that
 there is one God;
 there is also one mediator between God and humankind,
 Christ Jesus, himself human,
 who gave himself a ransom for all.

There is one God.
Our God
is the God of all people.
If we believe in one God,
then God
is the creator of all people
and God loves them
all.
All of them.

And Jesus Christ
who is our mediator,
our connection to God,
the way we come to know and love him,
Jesus Christ
gave himself
as a ransom for all.
Jesus gave himself up to death
so that all people
might be free from evil and hate and fear.

And that means
our prayers are not just limited
to those leaders
who have the power to affect Christians' freedom to worship;

our prayers
are for all people,
all people,
because each and every person
was created
in God's image
and by God's power,
and each and every person
is loved by God.

That's why we are commanded to pray for our friends
and for our enemies,
for those who love us
and for those who hate us.
We pray for the people of Iraq
and Afghanistan,
Syria and Somalia,
Kenya and Egypt.
We pray for Christians
and for Muslims,
for Jews and for Hindus,
for Buddhists
and for Sikhs.
We pray for teachers
and for soldiers,
for doctors
and for arms manufacturers,
for volunteers
and for politicians.
We pray for Democrats
and for Republicans,
for Socialists
and for Tea Partiers,
and everyone in between.

But above all, in response to the call from the letter to Timothy, we pray for our leaders.

And I invite you to join with me now,
as I pray the prayers for our world and its leaders
from our Book of Common Prayer.

We beseech thee also so to rule the hearts of those who bear

the authority of government in this and every land, that they may be led to wise decisions and right actions for the welfare and peace of the world.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.

For our President, for the leaders of the nations, and for all in authority, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.

I ask your prayers for peace; for goodwill among nations;
and for the well-being of all people.
Pray for justice and peace.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.

We pray for all who govern and hold authority in the nations of the world;
That there may be justice and peace on the earth.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.

Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.

For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and forbearance may grow among nations and peoples, we pray to you, O Lord.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.

For those in positions of public trust
that they may serve justice, and promote the dignity and

freedom of every person, we pray to you, O Lord.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer.

For this community, the nation, and the world;

For all who work for justice, freedom, and peace.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer.

And for the people of Kenya,

of Maaloula,

and of Peshawar,

and for ourselves:

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer.