

Views from the Pews: Tales from New York

What with all the ups and downs of the last two years, we may be forgiven for overlooking the 20th anniversary of the attacks on the USA; but last September there was in fact a lot on television to remind us of those events. Best perhaps was ‘One Day in America’ – this stood out because it gave oxygen neither to the terrorists who carried out the outrages, nor to America’s later foreign military adventures.

Rather, it gave all its space to the firefighters and other first responders, whose voices had not yet been properly heard. Because of the heavy loss of life suffered by the NYFD when the two towers collapsed, many survivors suffered psychological and spiritual wounds which endure to this day. Many had joined up to give something back to the city that had made room for their grandparents and great-grandparents. Many were wracked by guilt that they had survived when colleagues had not. Most seemed to think that they had not done enough; that they had not lived up to the ethic of service they had adopted. Many of those interviewed still bore internal scars which may never heal.

But it was very noticeable that psychological and spiritual recovery often depended on whether those men and women felt that they had complied with the Second Commandment. This applied whatever faith (or lack thereof) they professed. Healing came easiest to those who could relate a tale of lifesaving, whether directly, or as a party to others’ acts. The best example was the Black firefighter who guided a Jewish lawyer down a perilous stairwell to safety – his reward was an invitation to the lawyer’s daughters wedding (the video of which was shared with the viewers).

Matthew at Ch 22 vv 39-40 has Jesus leaving no doubt about the Second Commandment. The Second is ‘like’ the First; in the sense of being equal to it. But Jesus went on to say that all Jewish wisdom ‘depended’ on those two Commandments.

To gain freedom from inner pain, those New Yorkers had first to free their neighbour; it was in looking back to those acts of rescue and release that true healing was found.

We tend to treat freedom as an entitlement; Jesus was saying that freedom may have to be earned – that true freedom comes from releasing our neighbour from captivity first. Dangerous political territory indeed; little wonder He was executed, but, like the firefighters, the memory of his self-offering has inspired millions ever since.

Richard Swarbrick