**Peter J. Gomes**

***Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in***

***The Memorial Church, Harvard University***

**Outer Turmoil; Inner Strength**

Text: Set a straight course and keep to it, and do not be dismayed in the face of adversity.

*Ecclesiasticus 2:2 (The Apocrypha; REB)*

My text is the second verse of the second chapter of the book of Ecclesiasticus, and the lesson from which it was taken was read in the Revised English Bible; I am taking the King James translation of that same opening verse, which says: “Set they heart aright, and constantly endure, and make not haste in time of calamity.”

Let me begin with an observation, one might say, of comparative religion. I understand that in the traditions and liturgies of the Greek Orthodox Church, our brethren in the east, that when a child is baptised – and by “child” I mean an infant, not a squalling 7-year-old but a real infant, literally still damp – in that church, after the baptism has been performed the minister or priest or bishop, takes his very large pectoral cross – twice the size of mine – and forcefully strikes the little child on its breast, so hard that it leaves a mark, and so hard that it hurts the child and the child screams. In the West, we give the child roses. What is the difference here?

The symbolism of the Eastern baptism is clear, indicating that the child who has been baptised into Christ must bear the cross, and that the cross is a sign not of ease or of victory or of prosperity or of success, but of sorrow, suffering, pain, and death and by it those things are overcome. It is important to remember that. The symbol of our Christian faith is this very cross that you see on that holy table, carved in that choir screen, worn around the necks of many of us and held in honour and esteemed by all of us; and it stands to remind us of the troubles of the world that placed our Saviour upon it for sins that he did not commit. We Christians, therefore, like those Greek Orthodox babies ought to expect trouble, turmoil, and tribulation as the normal course of life. We don’t, however; and we have been seduced by a false and phony version of the Christian faith which suggests that by our faith we are immune to trouble.

Because we have been nice to God, our thinking goes, then God should be nice to us. Because you have interrupted your normal routine and come here today, God should somehow take note of it, mark it down in the book, and spare you any trouble, tribulation, turmoil or difficulty. Tribulation, we know, happens only to bad people – should it therefore be happening in spades to all those people in Canaday Hall as I speak, who are not here this morning, but just getting up out of bed, recovering from a night of pleasure and satiety? Tribulation happens only to the non-observant and the bad people; and when, as Rabbi Kushner so famously and quite profitably noted, bad things happen to good people, we feel that something has gone terribly wrong. God is not supposed to behave that way, we think, for that is not part of the deal; and we ask, “Where is God?” I’ll get back to that question, but that is what we ask.

Now, let me hasten to say that the answer to that conundrum is not a false conception of God. The issue has nothing what-so-ever to do with the so-called ‘death of God’, and everything to do with the life and the faith of the believer. It is not the death of God that should concern us; it is the questionable state of the life of the believer. God does not spare us from turmoil, which even the most casual observance of the Scriptures tells us: God strengthens us for turmoil, and we can find that in the Good Book as well. It is a shabby faith that suggests that God is to do all the heavy lifting and that you and I are to do none. The whole record of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, and the whole experience of the people of God from Good Friday down to and beyond Tuesday, September 11th, suggest that faith is forged on the anvil of human adversity. No adversity; no faith.

Consider the lessons we heard this morning. In the first lesson, which Dean Lewis read for us from one of the ancient books of the Jews, the Book of Ecclesiasticus in the Apocrypha, could it be put any plainer? “My son, if thou comest to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright, and constantly endure, and do not make haste in time of calamity.” You don’t need a degree in Hebrew Bible or exegesis to figure out what that is saying. What is the context for these words? Trouble, turmoil, tribulation, and temptation: that’s the given, that’s the context. What is the response for calamity? Endurance. Don’t rush, don’t panic. What are we to do in calamitous times? We are to slow down. We are to inquire. We are to endure. Tribulation does not invite haste; it invites contemplation, reflection, perseverance, endurance.

Where may we turn for examples of what I am trying to say that the scriptures say to us? We are in the middle, with our Jewish brethren, of the great ‘Days of Awe,’ with the beginning of the new year and the day of Atonement; and when the Jewish people celebrate these Days of Awe and begin their new year and atone for their sins, they always remember two things. First, they remember the troubles and the tribulations through which they have been, and they recite the history not of their victories but of their sorrows and their troubles. They remind themselves and one another, and everybody else, of how they have been formed and forged through the experience of trial and tribulation. They remember those things.

The second thing they remember is how the Lord delivered them out of those troubles and helped them to endure and bear and eventually overcome them. They are reminded of that, and they remind themselves of it over and over and over again; and when it is said that, “it is not the Jew who keeps the law, but the law which keeps the Jew,” it is to this process of remembrance, endurance, and deliverance that the aphorism speaks. Again, it says in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, “Look at the generations of old, and see. Whoever did put his trust in the Lord, and was ashamed? Or who did abide in his fear, and was forsaken? Or who did call upon him, and he despised him?” The history of the Jews in the world is not a history of escape from trouble: would that it were, but it is not. It is the record of endurance through tribulation, an endurance that would have been impossible with God. If any people had the right to claim that ‘God was dead’, or at least on sabbatical, it was the Jews, but they never have said it, and they never will, for they know better. They do not worship a metaphor or a simile, or a theological construct. They worship the one who stands beside them and who has been with them from Egypt to Auschwitz and beyond, and who enables them to stand up to all that a world of tribulation can throw at them. If we want to know about outer turmoil and inner strength, we need look no further than to our neighbours the Jews. Remember they wrote the book on the subject.

We may also look a little closer to home. We may look to the authentic witness of the Christian faith to which we bear, in this church, unambiguous allegiance. We do not just believe in God in general, or in a spiritual hope: we believe in Jesus Christ, who is all that we can fully know about God. So, we look at this tradition for inner strength in the midst of outer turmoil.

Consider St. Paul, a Jew and a Christian, and consider his view of things in a less than agreeable world. I hope you heard that second lesson read this morning in JB Phillips’s pungent prose; I chose it so it would get your attention. Listen to what St Paul says: “We are handicapped on all sides” – a very fashionable translation of the word, but apt – “but we are never frustrated. We are puzzled,” he says, “but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone” and… “- this fourth part is the part I like the most – “we may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out.”

Now, Paul is not an abstract theologian, like so many of my colleagues: Paul speaks from the experience of a frustrated but not defeated believer. This is not the “How to be Leaders and Win” sort of stuff that he writes; this is not the kind of CEO book that they trot out in the Business School and in motivational seminars. No. Paul writes out of failure, frustration, and conflict, but never out of despair. If you are looking for something to read in these troublesome times, do not turn to books of cheap inspiration and handy-dandy aphorisms; do not look for feel-good and no-stress and a lot-of-gain-and-no-pain kinds of books. They’re all out there and you will be sorely tempted, but if you want to read something useful during these times, my brothers and sisters in Christ, read the letters of Paul. Read them and weep! Read them and rejoice! Read them and understand that neither you nor I are the first people in the world ever to face sorrow, death, frustration, or terror: we are not the first, and there is a record of coping here that is not merely of coping but of overcoming. If you do not wish to succumb to the tidal wave of despair and temptation and angst that surrounds us on every hand, you will go back to the roots of our faith, which are stronger than any form of patriotism. I don’t despise patriotism, don’t misunderstand me; but there is no salvation in love of country. There is salvation only in love of Jesus Christ; and if you confuse the two, the greatest defeat will have been achieved. Remember that. Read the letters of Paul.

When you look at that fourth chapter in II Corinthians, the chapter with which we have been working today, you will discover that this is not a faith of evasion, a faith of success, or a faith of unambiguous pleasure and delight. It is a reality, a reality that believers have always been forced to face. “In the world,” says the apostle John, “we shall have tribulation.” Jesus says, “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” Well that’s all very right and good for Jesus, who in fact has overcome the world, and good for him, I say again; but for us who have not yet overcome the world, John’s gospel is as true as ever it was. In the world we shall have tribulation, and anyone who promises you otherwise is either uninformed or lying, and perhaps both; and owes no allegiance to the gospel. When we face the world as believers, we face it with tribulation on every hand.

From this very pulpit my venerable predecessor Willard Sperry used often to quote his friend and colleague, Georges Tyrell, who was one of the famous of the Catholic modernists of the first third of the twentieth century, and in a time when World War I was still fresh and World War II was clearly on the horizon, Sperry preached week after week to congregations like this – to your grandparents, three generations removed. One of his favourite quotations of Father Tyrell’s was Tyrell’s definition of Christianity: and this is what Tyrell said, what Sperry quoted, and what I now quote again: “Christianity is an ultimate optimism founded upon a provisional pessimism.” In this world we shall have tribulation.

So, a reasonable person – and we’re all reasonable persons here, are we not? That’s why we’re here and not in some other church – might ask, “From where has this notion come, that Christians are entitled to a free ‘get-out-of jail’ card, an exemption to the world of turmoil and tribulation?” This misreading of the Christian faith, for that is exactly what it is, comes from the fashionable, cultural faith with which we have so often confused the Christian faith. Most of us aspire to be believers in the Christian faith, but all of us to one degree or another, alas, ascribe to the cultural faith; and that cultural religion in times of prosperity is often easy and always dangerous. Be suspicious of religion in times of prosperity and ease. Why is it dangerous? It is dangerous because prosperity itself can become a terribly tempting false god and a substitute for religion; and in the name of the religion of prosperity, success, and control, most of us will do anything, and almost everything – and we have.

In times of prosperity either we make prosperity our religion, or we imagine that we can do without religion altogether. Who needs it? When turmoil happens to others we can be mildly empathetic, perhaps even sympathetic, and maybe we can even utter that famous aphorism, “Here but the for the grace of God go I”; but when turmoil hits us, when we are knocked flat, when all of our securities and our cherished illusions are challenged to the breaking point, and break, then comes the great question we must both ask and answer, “What is left when everything we have is taken from us?”

What is left when everything you have is taken from you? For the last decade I have asked on Commencement morning, in my sermons to the seniors about to leave this College, questions like this: “How will you live after the fall?” I don’t mean autumn; I mean the ‘fall’. “How will you manage when trouble comes? How will you manage when you are tested and fail the test? How will you cope with frustration and fear and failure and anxiety?” Many of them have thought those to be quaint and even rude questions, perhaps the kind of rhetorical excess that preachers engage in around Commencement time, a kind of raining on their parade.

Since September 11th, however, these are no longer abstract, philosophical, or theoretical questions, and people have gravitated in astonishing numbers to the places where such questions are taken seriously. Every rabbi, minister, priest, imam, and spiritual leader whom I know or have heard of, reports, as can I, the incredible turn toward faith in this time of our current crisis. Probably not since the Second World War has there been such a conspicuous turn to the faith in our country, and both our ordinary and our extraordinary services here in the last ten days bear profound witness to this. On Tuesday afternoon, September 11th, the day of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, and the downing of the plane in Pennsylvania, we saw thousands in the Yard in an ecumenical witness; and on Friday of the same week we saw almost as many here at a Service of Prayer and Remembrance, on a day especially designated a national day of Prayer and Remembrance. Last Sunday’s service was like Easter day, and this one is very close to it. The daily service of Morning Prayers in Appleton Chapel is nearly standing-room only, and this past week the president of this University asked if he could come and speak at Morning Prayers on Friday, thus proving beyond all shadow of doubt that there is a God. With his opening words from our lectern he said that this was the last place he expected to find himself so early in his administration. This is from a secular man who, by the standards of this secular place, is as close to God as many aspire to reach.

These are extraordinary times, this is an extraordinary moment, we are witnessing extraordinary things, and I ask you this: Is it not an incredible irony that in the face of the most terrible and tangible facts available to us, the destruction of those monuments to material success – the brutally physical worldly reality with the violence before our very eyes – that men and women instinctively turn to the very things that cannot be seen? They turn not to the reality of the visible but to the reality of the invisible which, when compared to what can be seen, ultimately endures. Seeking faith amidst the ruins is the subtext of these days. There’s a terrible parable there, that as the very temple to which we offered our secular worship is destroyed before us we seek the God who precedes and who follows these temples made and destroyed by human hands. People are seeking inner strength beyond the outer turmoil: that is what I see and that is what I hear on every hand, in every paper, in every magazine, on every talk show, and on everybody’s lips.

In the light of this, the question, “Where is God?” seems almost irrelevant. This was the question of the day for the religion editor of *The Boston Globe* last weekend, and a host of my clerical colleagues attempted an answer or two. I was not asked – another proof of the existence of God – but had I been, I would have said what I now say to you, which is that it was the wrong question. The question is not where God is when disaster strikes; the real and interesting question is where you were before disaster struck. Where were you two weeks ago? Three weeks ago? Where will you be three weeks from now, or four weeks from now? God has not forgotten you, but is it not reasonable to suggest that before September 11th, many of us had forgotten God? God is where God always is and has always been; it is we who have to account for our absence.

Be certain of one thing, however: we should not be embarrassed that now in adversity we seek the God whom we had forgotten in prosperity, for what is God for if he is not to be there when we seek him? We should not be embarrassed that in trouble we have remembered one profound theological truth, that God is to be found where God is most needed – in trouble, sorrow, sickness, adversity, and even in death itself. Over and over and over again the psalms make this point, as we sang in the sermon hymn, in paraphrase of Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble.”

Isn’t this Luther’s point in his great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God?*

*Let goods and kindred go,*

*This mortal life also;*

*The body they may kill;*

*God’s truth abideth still,*

*His kingdom is forever.*

You don’t have to be Lutheran to know the truth of that. Then remember that one of the few bright spots in the National Cathedral Service of Prayer and Remembrance, one week ago, came in Billy Graham’s sermon when he quoted the old hymn *How Firm a Foundation:*

*Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed!*

*For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;*

*I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,*

*Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand,*

Those hymns weren’t written yesterday. They were not written by people who did not know turmoil. They were written by people who in the midst of outer turmoil had inner strength.

This last week, as I’ve thought about this morning and my obligations toward you, two images have flashed in my mind. One was the indelible image of those burning towers and those terrible encounters with the airplanes, a kind of conflict of our own magnificent technologies coming together in a horrible parody of our skills and our strengths. That was one image. The other goes back to one of my favourite movies, which will identify all my phobias and predilections and will also give away my age. Between Dunkirk and Pearl Harbour there was produced one great film: *Mrs. Miniver*. How many of you here have ever seen *Mrs. Miniver?* Show me, please, I need some help here; thank you! You young people, look at these old people and go out and rent *Mrs. Miniver*. She’s a film, by the way. Go rent it; go see it. Those of you who know it know that I’m referring to that last scene in the bombed-out church on a Sunday morning, where, with the window destroyed and the cross standing in the broken window, and the people of the congregation ripped apart by Hitler’s bombing of their little village, yet still they are singing, “Children of the heavenly king/As we journey sweetly sing…” I know it was a great propaganda film, I know it was designed to rouse the souls and the spirits of the British people, I know it was the American version of Britain, with Walter Pidgeon and Greer Garson. I know all of that, and I believe it! So did the British people, and so do you need to believe that in that construction somewhere rests that image of the God who was with us at the most terrible moment of our time. The answer to the question, Where is God? Is that God is where God is always – by the side of those who need him. He is not in front to lead, not behind to push, not above to protect, but beside us to get us through: Beside us to guide us/Our God with us joining…”

I cannot imagine those heroic firefighters and policemen and workers and volunteers amidst the rubble of Ground Zero in New York, indulging in the luxurious theological speculation about where God might or might not be. They *know* where God is: he is right there with them, enabling them, empowering them, strengthening them, even when hope itself has died. If you want to know where God is, do not ask the prosperous. Ask the suffering. Ask the sorrowing. Ask those who are acquainted with grief.

In the Book of Common Prayer there is a collect which begins, “God of all comfort…” To some who don’t know any better that sounds like mere consolation, something soothing, adequate words in troubled times of turmoil and tribulation, a kind of Band-Aid on cancer, if you like, like the “comfortable words” in the old Book of Common Prayer, which were not very comforting to a church and a culture which had grown too comfortable. Do you know the proper meaning of the word ‘comfort’ by the way? You’re about to. It means to ‘fortify’, to strengthen’, to ‘give courage’, even ‘power’, and not merely consolation. The God of all comfort is the one who supplies what we most lack when we most need it. As Paul puts it, he gives us sufficient capacity that when we are knocked down we are not knocked out. The God of all comfort is not a god who fights like Superman, or Rambo, or Clint Eastwood or any of our conventional cultural heroes. The God of all comfort is the one who gives inner power and strength to those who would be easily outnumbered, outmanoeuvred, and out powered by the conventional forces and the conventional wisdom. Inner strength is what is required when in the midst of turmoil we do not know what to do with our outward power and our outward might.

Let us also not forget one powerful fact that we are tempted to forget, which is that the world has always been a dangerous and precarious place. The fact that we have just discovered this terrible fact for ourselves does not make it any less true, or any less dangerous. Outer turmoil is no longer the fate that falls to others: the shrinking world that has allowed us to export technology abroad has now, alas, permitted terror to be imported to us. The great question now is how we stand and how we manage in a world now less brave, now less new than ever it was.

Inner strength, I believe, comes from the sure conviction that God has placed us in the world to do the work of life, and not of death. This is what St. Paul says in Corinthians. “We are always facing death,” he writes, “but this means that we know more and more of life.” (II Corinthians 4:11) Faith is not the opposite either of doubt or of death but the means whereby we face and endure doubt and death, and overcome our fear of them. Our inner faith as believers comes from the sure conviction that neither death nor doubt nor fear is the last word. This is not a policy statement for the nation; this is a sure conviction for Christian believers. Therefore, because we believe that, and because that belief is testified to by the experience of our ancestors in the faith and our contemporaries who labour beside us and for God in the rubble, we are able to endure. We are able to go through the worst for the best, come what may. Endurance is what it takes when you have nothing left. Phillips Brooks once said that we do not pray for lighter loads, but for greater strength to bear the loads we are given. Heavy loads have been placed upon us in these days, and even greater burdens and sacrifices are to come: of that there can be no doubt, and, like Jesus in the Garden, we would be less than human if we did not pray that this cup might pass us by – but it won’t. The real issue for us is, then, as it was for Jesus, how do we manage?

Inner strength in the midst of turmoil, I suggest, is not simply stoic endurance and perseverance, important as they are, especially in tough, demanding times. Nor is inner strength simply a form of mind over matter, a kind of moral escapism that says that you ‘may have captured my body but my mind is free’. It’s not only either of those. When I tried to think of what it was, I remembered a story told by old Dr Ernest Gordon, for many years Dean of the Chapel at Princeton, and more famous because of his book about his captivity on the River Kwai during World War II. In that Japanese prison camp, Ernest Gordon said that he and his fellow British who were captives were initially very religious, reading their Bibles, praying, singing hymns, witnessing and testifying to their faith, and hoping and expecting that God would reward them and fortify them for their faith by freeing them or at least mitigating their captivity. God didn’t deliver, however, and the men became both disillusioned and angry, and some even faithless. They gave up on their outward display of their faith; but after a while, Gordon says, the men, responding to the needs of their fellows – caring for them, protecting the weaker ones, and in some cases dying for one another – began to discern something of a spirit of God in their midst. It was not a revival of religion in the conventional sense, but rather the discovery that religion was not what you believed but what you did for others when it seemed that you could do nothing at all. It was compassion that gave them their inner strength, and it was from their inner strength that their compassion came. I owe this insight to Dr A Leonard Griffiths, in *Illusions of our Culture*.

Could it be that amidst the cries of vengeance and violence and warfare, and the turmoil that is attempting to sweep us all up in the calamity of these days, the inner strength we so desperately seek is the strength that comes from compassion, from hearing and heeding the cry of the other?

In one of Theodore Parker Ferris’s books I found underlined these words about strength:

“Some people’s strength is all drawn from themselves. They are like isolated pools with limited reserves. Others are more like rivers. They do not produce or contain the power, but it flows through them, like blood through the body. The more they give, the more they are able to draw in. That strength is theirs, but it is not their own.”

Then the author says, in words that I wish were mine:

“The strength that God gives is available to those who care for others, for they are showing the spirit of Jesus. The power of God’s spirit fortifies them.”

(Hugh Martin; *The Beatitudes*; Harper & Brothers; 1953)

Can it be that inner strength is not simply the capacity to endure, but to give? Can it be that compassion is superior to power? Can it be that amid the turmoil of that violent crowd on Good Friday, from his inner strength Jesus showed compassion? He forgave his enemies, he reunited his friends, and he redeemed the criminal.

When in the midst of turmoil and calamity you seek the inner strength that helps you not only to endure but to overcome, do not look for what you can get: look rather for what you have been given, and for what you can give. We begin with calamity, but we end with compassion. Remember the quotation that Theodore Ferris had underlined. “The strength that God gives is available for those who care for others…”

**Sermon delivered by the Reverend Professor, Peter J Gomes on Sunday, 23 September 2001 at the Memorial Church, Harvard University.**