

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The glory has departed

Presented by Bob Smith

One of the most powerful images of Ground Zero – the site of the World Trade Towers destroyed on 9/11 – is that of *The Ground Zero Cross*. Frank Silecchia, a rescue worker, was the first to see it. He found a Catholic Priest, Father Brian Jordan, and said: ‘Father, do you want to see God’s house; look over there.’

The priest and a group of other rescue workers followed Frank to a six metre cross made of two steel supporting beams standing upright in the midst of the rubble. There, amidst the ruins of what had been the very symbol of economic power, stood the cross, the symbol of faith.

It is now part of the National Memorial and Museum to 9/11; and, despite protests from *The American Atheists*, and objections from the politically correct activists, it stands as a reminder of that eternal truth the scriptures speak of; that no matter how powerful the gods of this world may seem to be, they are all destined to fall. But the Cross, and the faith it represents, will stand forever.

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For a number of generations now the Western World has been increasingly forsaking the spiritual heritage that once defined it. Instead, it has sought its salvation in the god of economic growth – or the worship of Mammon, as Jesus described it. No other structure anywhere in the world represented the power and prestige of economic growth more powerfully than the World Trade Centre. That was why the terrorists chose it as their target. It represented everything the West stands for, and everything they wanted to destroy.

But now, several years later, even though the World Trade Centre is being re-built, the world stands on the edge of an abyss; confronted by a looming environmental catastrophe and the collapse of the economic system that created it. Despite the arguments of the sceptics who tell us that the crazy weather conditions we currently experience are just part of a cycle, I think most of us have serious doubts about what sort of world we are about to bequeath to our grandchildren. And yet we seem unwilling to pay the price of cleaning it up.

The town of Fallon, in Nevada, is a good example of our dilemma. It’s been called the arsenic capital of America. The Environmental Protection Agency found that Fallon's water system delivers more arsenic than anywhere else. The locals even joke about it: one of them was reported as saying, "Arsenic is no biggie. I'll die of something. It's called life. Once you're born, you start dying."

The arsenic levels remain high because the locals don't want to pay for the solution—a ten million dollar treatment plant. And the reason for this is that they don't want to feel that the government is intruding in their lives by telling them what they have to do. It’s an example of that human tendency to deal with the great moral and spiritual issues of life by refusing to think about them.

And then there’s other sword hanging over our heads. We are all aware of how perilously close the western world’s financial system is to collapse, built, as it is, on a mountain of unsustainable debt. Two years ago the world economic crisis appeared to have been solved because governments paid the debts run up by the banks. But now it’s the governments themselves that are unable to pay off their debts; and if it were not for

the booming economies of places like China, India and Brazil, the future would look grim indeed. And yet the industrial growth of those economies is also exacerbating the looming environmental crisis.

I wonder, was the collapse of the World Trade Fair a symbol of what is to come? And if it was, was the *Ground Zero Cross* an even greater symbol?

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One of the Bible's most powerful stories is that of the capture of the ark of the covenant by the pagan Philistines. It took place about a thousand years before the birth of Christ in that part of Israel where the coastal plain meets the high country leading up to Jerusalem. The Philistines lived along the coastal plain and were frequently at war with the Israelites. The leader of Israel at that time was the High Priest, Eli. He was basically a good man, but seems to have been a weak leader, who allowed his sons, also priests, to get away with the most scandalous and corrupt behaviour.

Well, the day of reckoning came, as it always does, when the Israelites suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of the Philistines. They were shocked and puzzled as to why God would allow this to happen. So they decided to play their trump card. They went back into battle, but this time they took with them the ark of the covenant – their most sacred symbol.

The ark itself was a wooden box, covered with gold, which only the priests were allowed to carry. It contained the two stone tablets on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments, plus a bowl of the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness, and the rod carried by Aaron, the first high priest. Nothing was more sacred to the people of Israel than this gold box. To them, it was the very symbol of God's presence. For them to risk it in battle showed how desperate they were, and also how confident they were that God wouldn't and couldn't let anything happen to it.

The reality, though, was very different. They suffered an even greater defeat; and, worst of all, the ark of the covenant was captured and carried off by the Philistines to the temple of their god, Dagon, as a trophy. When Eli the priest received the news that his sons had been killed and the ark captured, the shock caused him to fall off his seat and, being very old and very heavy, he broke his neck and died. And then, his pregnant daughter-in-law, hearing the news of her husband's death and the capture of the ark, gave birth to a premature baby whom she named *Ichabod*, which means, *the glory has departed*; because, for those people, everything they believed in had collapsed.

But next morning the Philistines went into their temple to find the statue of their god, Dagon, fallen down on its face before the ark of the covenant. They set it back up, but the following morning, it was on its face again, this time with its head and hands broken off. That's when the Philistines learned that 'God is not mocked'.

And ever since, every time in history when it seems that God has been rendered impotent by the arrogance of this world's power, something like 9/11 happens to remind us that ultimately: 'The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever.'

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One of the more controversial items of Jesus' teaching is that that there will come a day when human misrule of this world will come to an end and he will return to set up the eternal Kingdom of God. It became one of the major themes of the early church and was enshrined in the ancient creeds which still form the basis of Christian doctrine. It also built on the Jewish belief of a coming 'Day of the Lord'.

The Jews regarded time as being in two ages. There was this present age, which was full of evil and could never be cured, fit only for destruction; and there was the age to come, which would be a golden age where

God's Kingdom would be supreme over all the earth. But in between the two there would be 'the Day of the Lord', which would be a terrible time of cosmic upheaval and destruction, and the birth pangs of the new age.

It was against this background that Jesus predicted his own second coming to usher in the age of God's Kingdom. He referred specifically to two great events that will precede his coming. The first is that "the gospel of the kingdom would be preached to all nations." The second was a series of striking and fearful signs that Jesus said would be "the birth pangs of the new age": wars, famines, and earthquakes in diverse places; and a time of terrible tribulation "such has not been from the beginning of the world".

Well, every generation has looked at the fearful events of its day and seen in them a possible fulfilment of the portents Jesus spoke of. People saw it in things like the fall of the Roman Empire, the fearful invasion of the Mongol hordes that swept through Asia and into Central Europe. They saw it in the Black Death that took nearly half of Europe's population. People also saw it in the awful slaughter of World War One, and then again in the even greater cataclysm of World War Two. People of my generation have seen it in the threat of nuclear war, and in the ecological devastation of the natural world.

But the thing Jesus took pains to stress was that his coming would be at a time when people would least expect it – it would be "like a thief in the night" he said. So we shouldn't waste our time speculating about when it will be, because that's in God's hands. We should just concentrate on the tasks in life he has given us to do, and be ready - ready should he return or should we be called into his presence by death, confident that his words to us will be, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Then, as the words of the old gospel song, *Whispering Hope*, put it: "We'll dread not the oncoming tempest, hope rides the wings of the storm. Grief shall give way to rejoicing, when Christ the King shall return."

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Throughout history arrogant men have predicted the demise of faith in God, claiming that humankind has now outgrown such superstition. And every time, something has happened to bring whatever they've put their trust in crashing down, while the faith they decried lives on.

The *Ground Zero Cross* is a symbol of this. So is the huge tower built by the Communist leaders of the former East Germany to broadcast atheistic propaganda. Near the top was a globe-shaped restaurant. The remarkable thing was that the sunlight always reflected off the globe in the shape of a cross. The authorities were embarrassed and tried everything they could to prevent this optical phenomenon, but nothing worked. No matter how hard they tried, they, like all those before them, couldn't get rid of the Cross.

And today, European communism is no more, but the faith it sought to destroy lives on. For 'The kingdoms of this world are destined to become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever.'