

Jacob's ladder: Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

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by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor. (Hebrews 2:6, 7)

An incredible respect for life wove together the disparate humanity that worked the edges of the New York abyss. Iron workers, emergency and fire department rescue teams, volunteers sharing coffee and backrubs, chaplains bending low to listen, gawking tourists, stricken loved ones hunched over pictures and lit candles—all were woven together in the solidarity of citizenship of those regarded by God as “for a little while lower than the angels.”

As I arrived one November day to conduct the memorial service for fireman Vincent, all the streets were blocked by fire engines and police vehicles. Vincent had finished his shift at Ladder 35 on the West Side on the morning of September 11 and was on his way home when the first plane hit. He returned and worked on “Jacob’s ladder” in the smoky stairways of the towers, ascending and descending as part of a human chain of rescue, suffering and death. The pastoral task in these latter days has been to grasp the vision of God at each end of the ladder, bearing with us on earth, bearing home those who ascended.

"But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

The writer of Hebrews gives us a glimpse into the pastoral life of the early church, living at the far side of the Ground Zero of the paschal mystery: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. On that November day we plumbed the mystery of death and resurrection. As over 1,000 people arrived, the modest parish in Middle Village, Queens, was suddenly in the public eye, handling press, protocol and immense crowds of distraught people. And this was only one of thousands of memorials held in that season throughout the metropolis.

Many were not accustomed to being in church. Those of us who could sing sang the liturgy on behalf of those who no longer knew the words or were too numb with grief to sing. But that is our theological task. We have been ordained and baptized for these latter days and for a time such as this. How shall we speak and act "in many and various ways"? Pastor Longan remembered the heroic way in which Vinnie lived and died, then moved from Vinnie to God, whose rescue of the world from sin, death and the evil one was accomplished by the cross and the laid-down life.

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son."

How do we make the great "hand-me-down" of the tradition of faith relevant? After 9/11 people aren't only asking, "What, really, is a Muslim?" They also want to know what a Christian is, and a Christian community. Who is my neighbor now? What does a life worth living look like? Where is true security? What happens when I die? I sense a true desire to learn how to talk to our Maker.

Paul Tillich reminds us that "theology, as a function of the Christian church, must serve the needs of the church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation."

Vinnie's father got lost in the eulogy. He was fully engaged as he mentioned one memory after another, but then he could not get out of the cul-de-sac of memory. Every time he began to conclude he was unable to face the terrible truth. Vinnie died. And there was not even a body in the church, only the memories.

"As it is we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus."

Like Vinnie's father we cannot see the outcome of all things. But at the Eucharist we could see and taste Jesus. At the table the truth is told. Christ has died. Vinnie has died. We say it and face it. Christ has risen. Vinnie has been buried with Christ by baptism unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the power of the Father, so Vinnie will again walk in newness of life. Christ will come again. And bring us home where Vinnie waits "with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven . . . in every time and every place."

Two months after the memorial service they found Vinnie's remains. Silence washed over Ground Zero. Hats were removed, bodies waited reverently as they lifted him from the wreckage and carried him out. Several days later I attended the liturgy, which centered on Good Friday and a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*. The church was overflowing, and when the congregation sang, "Lord, let at last thine angels come," we knew that once again in these latter days God had spoken to us.

"It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters."