

In a foreign place: Enemy love and realism

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

It's a cliché to observe that since September 11 we are living in a different world, that everything seems different now. But it is true. I heard Harvard's Peter Gomes say recently that things sound different now. Phrases read and spoken for thousands of years suddenly sound immediate, as if they were written last week for us. The weekly reading of the Psalter in worship, an experience that for many people is simply endured, and doesn't offer much intellectual engagement, suddenly became very relevant, according to one regular worshiper at Harvard's Memorial Church. That's been my experience as well.

"The Lord is my shepherd . . . even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. . . ." "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice! . . . By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and wept . . . How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" As I read those words now, I hear them differently. They feel as if they have been written for us, in this new world—this foreign place.

I have pondered particularly the words of Jesus about loving enemies and what they have to do with the war President Bush has declared on terrorism and the bombs the U.S. is dropping on Afghanistan. I am not troubled by American resolve to apprehend those who orchestrated, supported, funded and carried out the attacks on September 11. But I am troubled by the fact that the people of Afghanistan, arguably among the poorest, most oppressed and most long-suffering on the face of the earth, are the ones absorbing the fury of our war on terrorism.

I am concerned that we are dropping food parcels in Afghanistan and asking school children to donate dollars to help feed hungry Afghanistan children, after years of looking the other way as Afghanistan descended into political and economic chaos. And I am deeply worried that what we are doing is fueling the very rage in the Islamic world that produced Osama bin Laden and his supporters in the first place.

And I confess that, given everything that is going on, and the cycle of violence from which there seems to be no escape, I think Jesus was not a dreamy idealist but a supreme realist when he told his surprised disciples, and us, to love our enemies.