

WHY THE GREAT LITANY?  
The Rev. Mark Wilkinson, Rector  
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church  
Virginia Beach VA 23452  
[www.aidanvbva.net](http://www.aidanvbva.net)

So why do we do the Great Litany? That was the question that was asked at a Christian Formation meeting last month when we looking at the challenge when the first Sunday of Lent falls on a youth Sunday. Well to begin with that is one time when the Great Litany is supposed to be read. It can be done at other times of penitence and I will speak to that in a moment.

Maybe it would be helpful to look at the purpose of Lent. What Lent is about is clearly laid out in the invitation to Lent from the Ash Wednesday service.

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer.

So if Lent is truly about fasting, repentance, examination of our lives and making a change to how we live then maybe the Great Litany begins to make sense. Now to be honest I can't think of very many sins that were left out of the Great litany it seems pretty darn complete. Yes it is an old piece of liturgy one of the oldest in the prayer book and does seem a little dated in language, but the intent, well I believe that still holds true.

Now before seminary I had some of the same feelings about the Great Litany as I heard in that meeting. I enjoyed the singing of the Litany at St. Paul's in Cleveland Heights I mean when the cantor is a professional singer it was majestic to listen to as it was sung in procession and the choir went around the church several times and hearing it at the National Cathedral is an incredible

experience. However that was more about the musical experience and not about theology.

I don't think I really understood the power of the Great Litany until 9/11 when I had just started at Virginia Seminary. Now some of you know this story but I do not think I have told it to our youth, so since this is their Sunday I'm going to tell again. I started at VTS in September of 2001. We had finished our Greek and Hebrew intensive, 2 weeks of nothing but Greek or Hebrew at the end of August. Regular classes had just started that incredibly clear and wonderful day of September 11. We were at chapel at 8 and as we came out and went to our mailboxes in Addison Hall the receptionist had her radio on and said a plane had accidentally flown into the World Trade Center. Then the second one hit. Students who lived in the dorms went to their common rooms and turned on the television. I was sitting in my car listening to NPR when I heard and felt an explosion that shook my car and I was told rattled the windows in the historic buildings. As I headed back to the administration building I met the dean who told me to go to all the dorms and call the students back to the chapel at 10:00 for prayer. The explosion was the plane that hit the Pentagon. Soon we could see the smoke rising in the distance. VTS is only about 5 miles from the Pentagon.

As we knelt in the chapel the dean began the Great Litany. All of a sudden the power of this began to sink in. I cannot read the words.

*From all oppression, conspiracy, and rebellion; from violence,  
battle, and murder; and from dying suddenly and unprepared,  
Good Lord, deliver us*

without hearing the sounds of ambulances coming up Quaker Lane and turning onto Seminary Road on their way to the INOVA Alexandria hospital. The closest hospital to the Pentagon. Just as the dean read those words several fighter jets came screaming over the campus. Violence, battle and murder; and from dying suddenly and unprepared has an entirely different meaning to me now. I suspect that most people can find something in the Great Litany that truly touches them for none of us has lived a life that has not been touched in some way by evil or sin.

Many Episcopalians tend to really to diminish the role of sin in our world and the Great Litany really puts that right up in our face. Now I do want to remind you of our definition of sin. Anything that breaks relationship with God, with others or with creation. All of the "sins" the behaviors or actions in the Great Litany are all about breaking relationship. However there is more to the Litany than just a really long and interesting list of sins. There are also prayers for those moments in life that are difficult. This is an acknowledgement that the world is a difficult and challenging place. The Litany acknowledges that there is evil in the world. Now

I could do an entire sermon or teaching series on evil. Trust me, there is evil in the world, I have experienced it. Yes I believe in demons, I've encountered what I can only call a demon at least three different times. So while I may keep a very positive view of the world I can assure you that I also know there is a very dark side to our world. The Great Litany is a chance to be reminded of that very important reality. The Great Litany will not let us turn away and ignore this. However we can only face evil and sin if we acknowledge that it is a very real problem in our world today. I do not know how you watch current events around the world and not see a very sinful and evil world.

Naming evil is important. Naming sin is important. We cannot do anything about them if we don't acknowledge that they exist. I think one good thing that is coming out of some of the current mess is evil feels this is the time to come out, but that means evil is no longer hiding under some rock. We can see, name it and fight it.

I have heard our youth talk about some of these issues and they are pretty darn good and naming evil and sin when they see it. This is one of the great gifts of the millennial generation, they are known for a very strong sense of what is right and what is wrong. They have a strong sense of justice, which is something we desperately lack in today's world. They don't stand for hypocrisy which in some respects is why so few are part of organized religion They will not put up with it and neither should we. And of course we should not be part of the hypocrisy ourselves.

Then there are the responses: Good Lord deliver us. That is an important acknowledgment from where our help comes. Our help come from God. Not necessarily making sure bad things don't happen, but the we see them and work against. Them.

So the Great Litany is a great list of wrongs in the world, but we cannot fix the wrongs, the sin, the evil until we name it for what it is. We also cannot fight these evils without God's help. The Great Litany covers all of that.