

The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright
Bishop, The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta
24th Annual City of Atlanta Police Memorial Service
Atlanta City Hall
May 5, 2015

Good morning! I greet you this morning in the Name of God – no matter what name you use for God: Yahweh, Allah, Jehovah or Jesus. I’m talking about the Almighty, living and true God. The Giver of every good gift. The God that gave each of us the strength to rise and greet the day.

I bring you greetings on behalf of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta – that is, the Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia: 56,000 men, woman, children, teenagers and elders in 110 worshiping communities. Thank you to Chief Turner and to Assistant Chief Jones for your kind invitation to join you this morning.

This is truly an honor for me. Speakers say that all the time, don’t they, that they are honored to come and speak? But let me tell you why that is true for me this morning. I am honored to be here because you are servants of the common good, day after day, year after year. You face dangers great and small. You stand in harm’s way so that our city will be safer. When there is a crisis or an emergency, it is you that we long to see. It is you we hope is on the way. So I am honored to be with you because you are servants.

I believe that every police officer has a servant’s heart. Dr. King said so many years ago that, “Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" The people in this room can answer that question with confidence.

Jesus told his friends long ago that true greatness comes from service. And so if He is right, there is greatness in this room. Not the kind of greatness that the world easily

recognizes. Not celebrity, or wealth, but the kind of greatness that is made up of a hundred small generous acts that never make the nightly news. Wherever there are men and women who have committed themselves to service, I am always truly honored to be. But we have come here for a specific purpose this morning – to remember those officers who have made the supreme sacrifice. We are here to remember our fallen heroes, the 82 men and women who lost their lives in the line of duty – from as far back as the 1800s, to as recently as 2012. Serving the common good. The Best of the Best.

So this morning, we not only remember them, we thank God for their sacrifice. It is a courageous thing you do by remembering those who have fallen, year after year. I wonder, do you know that? Most people try very hard to forget the tragedies of their lives. Most organizations try and bury all of the bad and scary things. But you have decided to annually remember these men and women, and to remember the circumstances of their death. I call this courageous.

In another conversation with his friends, Jesus said that if you want to build a strong tower, you have to first sit down and count the cost. That's what we're doing here today. You who wear the badge know more than any other group what it costs to make Atlanta safe. Your loved ones especially know, in the currency of their emotions, what it costs to keep Atlanta safe. And for that, every Atlantan and every visitor to Atlanta owes you and your family a debt of gratitude. And grateful is what we are even in the face of danger and death – because we have faith.

Through the eyes of faith, we know that those whom we love – but see no longer – now live with God. Because of faith we know that in death, life is not ended...life is just changed. Because of faith we know that our colleagues and loved ones may have passed on but they have passed to that place where there is no danger, no need for doctors, no taxes, no terrorists, no trouble of any kind; no sighing, no sorrow and no more tears.

You may not be able to picture heaven in your imagination. That's OK. But God's word tells us that God's mercy endures forever. So even if I can't picture it, somehow I believe that there is a reality beyond this reality. I may see through a dim glass now, but over there I will see face to face.

And while I am talking about faith, let me also state something for the record, especially given what has happened in Baltimore, and Ferguson and North Charleston and Long Island and Cleveland and in many other American cities. Do people have the right to peacefully protest? Yes. Should people go to jail if convicted by a jury of their peers? Yes. But in all of that, I want you to know, I still have faith in the police. I still have faith in the police.

I don't say this lightly. I say this as the father of three African-American sons. Thank God, I learned a long time ago that the service of many shouldn't be defined by the abuses of a few. This is true for politicians, true for ministers and true for the police. I know that while you may live in and patrol neighborhoods, the world is a long way from becoming a brotherhood and a sisterhood. The work you do is hard and can sometimes make people brittle and bitter. Some people say that the remedy for the abuses may be body cameras. And they may be right. I do not know.

What I do know is that the best remedy for abuse is the men and women in this room who stay committed to compassionate law enforcement. That is the faithful execution of your duty and oaths while recognizing the dignity of even the most egregious offender. I am passionate about this because for me it is a personal matter. You see, I was one of those young people growing up in a poor inner-city neighborhood. And it was a law enforcement officer who caught me in the wrong and with the wrong crowd. But it was his short, kind words to me that helped to turn me around. And those words were, "You don't belong here son." And for that I am eternally grateful.

Do you remember your Police Officer's Prayer? In that prayer, we are reminded that God is powerful. And that God has chosen to be the kind of powerful that shares power. So we ask God to deliver us from the coldness of heart that can creep in on those of us who have served faithfully for many years. And we know, above all, that God delights in mercy. That's what the old folks mean when they say we serve a God that sits high and looks low.

So as we remember today those who have fallen in the line of duty, and as we remember their families, who have suffered loss so that we could be safer, let us ask God to bless *every* public official, to bless each and every one of their homes and families, and to bless all of those who wear the badge and serve the common good.

Let us pray together the Police Officer's Prayer:

Almighty God, whose great power and eternal wisdom embraces the universe, watch over all policemen and law enforcement officers everywhere. Protect them from harm in the performance of their duty to stop crime, robbery, riots and violence. We pray, help them keep our streets and homes safe, day and night. We commend them to Your loving care, because their duty is dangerous; grant them strength and courage in their daily assignments. Dear God, protect these brave men and women. Grant them Your almighty protection, and unite them safely with their families after their duty has ended. Amen.