

Christians in a Complex World. Session 4

Justice and Peace

There are numerous moral questions on which Christians disagree, and sometimes even find a way to disagree amicably. One of those issues is the question of war.

I was born in WWII and brought up to feel gratitude for those who gave their lives that others may live. There was talk of courage, and valour and self-sacrifice. That is what we gratefully remember each Remembrance Sunday. There is something about human nature which is wonderful, generous and inspiring.

On the other hand I also feel pain. Some of my contemporaries lost relatives in that War. It is often an angry pain, that one person should be required to kill another. It is a painful feeling that also comes back when I think of the Gulf War, or the millions walking in London to protest about the Iraq War. When I think of the Rwanda massacre, or the civil unrest in Afghanistan, or the Rohingya Muslims. We cannot escape the squalor and horror and waste of war. There is something about human nature which is destructive, selfish and aggressive.

The Letter of James says "what causes wars and fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members. Your desire and do not have, so you kill. Your covet and cannot obtains, so you wage war." The UNESCO Charter put it like this: "Wars begin in the hearts of men."

Our human nature is ambiguous: gloriously created in God's image, and yet fallen and fractured and sinful.

And because of that ambiguity, Christians have felt themselves pulled in different directions in their responses to war.

There has from the early centuries of the Church been a strong strand of Christian pacifism, seeking to follow the example of Christ in not meeting aggression with further aggression. In the C2nd, Tertullian said that 'when Christ told Peter to put up his sword, he unbelted every soldier.' Pacifism has sought to bear witness to the fact that God is a God of peace. It has been criticised for not being practical politics, or for not taking sin seriously enough. But we need the witness it bears to the nature of God: God is a God of peace. And Jesus pronounces a blessing on peacemakers.

On the other hand, when faced with attacks of evil against values of good and right, other Christian people have believed that to engage in war can be a lesser evil choice, out of love for our neighbour, to make sure that evil is restrained and to fight for the cause of justice. We do not love our neighbours, or our enemies, by letting injustice prevail. Some Christian thinkers have talked in terms of 'just war'. Now

we need to be careful: they did not primarily seek to justify war, but severely to limit war by the requirements of justice. They sought to bear witness to the nature of God: that God is a God of justice. This has been criticised for not taking the example of Christ seriously enough. But the Bible also speaks of a God who 'will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.'

If we talk about peace without the quest for justice, our peace-making can become a hollow papering over of injustices for the sake of a quiet life. If we talk about justice without what St Augustine called 'the spirit of the peacemaker', our justice can become harsh, punitive and vengeful.

There is a biblical word which holds God's justice and God's peace together: that word is 'shalom'.

Nowadays, 'Shalom' is a greeting: - you hear it when you go into a grocer's shop in Haifa: "Shalom". You can hear it at Disneyland. There is a ride called "It's a small world after all" in which the dolls of every country you can think of are singing to you. At the end they sing: Goodbye, Au Revoir, Auf Wiedersehen, Shalom.

In the Bible, "Shalom" is often translated "peace", but it means much more than the absence of conflict. It means wholeness in all our relationships - within ourselves, with one another, with our environment, with God.

Shalom is peace with justice: the peace that comes from establishing God's justice; the justice that leads to wholeness and wellbeing and flourishing to all people and communities and all creation.

Psalm 85 has it in a lovely text: When God's salvation comes, "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; justice and peace will embrace." That is a vision to inform our politics and our prayers.

I want in my last few minutes to say a bit more about what is called 'Just War' theory, and the criteria that were established by Christian thinkers, out of love, severely to limit war by the requirements of justice. St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas and the Dutch lawyer Grotius, built on early thinking from Roman philosophers.

Two of the 'severe limits' are the criterion of proportion (use only the minimum force needed) and the criterion of discrimination (non-combatants must not be directly targeted). It was to these criteria that Bishop Bell famously appealed in 1944 challenging the allied saturation bombing of Hamburg and Berlin: 'That is not a justifiable act of war' - it was not proportionate nor discriminate. It was these criteria that British troops were supposed to use during the 1970s trouble in Belfast.

The most obvious immediate use for us is when we think about nuclear weapons - which use maximum and not minimum force, and which are *indiscriminate by design*. In my view, they must never again be used. In my view again, nuclear deterrence works by a threat which is neither proportionate, nor discriminate, nor just: "we will be unbelievably cruel to you if we are provoked far enough". I personally think this makes the search for an alternative to renewing Trident very pressing.

But whichever way we go on all this - whether we are inclined towards peace-making, or towards establishing justice, the vision of the Psalmist can be our guide: When God's salvation comes, "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; justice and peace will embrace." That is a vision to inform our politics and our prayers.