

Christian Responses to Conflict and Violence – 1

Sermon by Revd Deryck Collingwood on Lent 1

On these first three Sundays of Lent I will be offering thoughts about Christian responses to conflict and violence. It's a wide subject and an emotive one, and I can only tackle it briefly on certain levels. But I hope these addresses will prompt some further reflections.

Conflict and violence is something that affects us at both personal and national levels. It is constantly around us and it usually seems to be the bad-news stories that make the front pages ahead of the good news.

Many of us will have experienced personal violence in some form at some time in our lives. Not so many will have been involved in military conflict and we have to respect the sobering experience of those who have. That is something I have no direct experience of, though I've had close friends go off to Vietnam as well as various British conflict zones.

But all of us carry some sort of collective consciousness of what these things do and what forms us as a nation and a people, and that formation is also closely related to our personal formation from an early age. I still have some of my toy soldiers,, which I take out with a smile of childhood memories – despite the fact that I would not give my own son soldiers or guns. But he made up for that in the fantasy world of Transformers and computer game horrors of a far more violent nature.

So you see why people have wondered right down through history if violence is really just part of the human make-up; and why people wondered how a good God could create people who do such horrendous things to each other.

Religious thinkers attributed that to the 'Fall', where something went wrong and we became less than we were intended to be. They say that only humans, chimps and ants make war against one another. If one accepts some relationship between humans and chimps in terms of the Fall, I'm not sure how one accounts for the ants...

I wish to speak about some Christian responses to that – and how Christian tradition has sought at least to help keep life in balance or allow God's grace to redeem the mess we make.

First: the classic question of justifying the use of force or violence to tackle violence or abuse. Next week, the Christian tradition of pacifism in following the example of Christ. And lastly, what might be called the roots of peace-making, or the tradition of Shalom as the Christian way of life within the world.

So, when do we justify violence? What makes it ok? Self defence? Defence of someone else who's being hurt or abused? For the most part we teach our children to stick up for themselves; we don't want them to be bullied. Bullying is a dreadful thing. Hopefully we teach them to stick up for others who are being bullied, but that can take a very brave child to actually intervene.

But when does 'sticking up for yourself' justifiably move over into taking physical action to put someone else down and take the upper hand? – When is the use of physical power ok to deter a perceived aggressor?

We've heard several stories recently of people questioning the current law when someone breaks into your home – how far should you be allowed to go in defending your property, yourself, your children? None of us really knows how we would respond on that level until we are in that situation, and I don't wish to moralise, but in all of this, I am going to ask the question about what *inspires* you in forming your opinions and what do you *aspire to*? Because you need to know where your guide in life is coming from.

It's not a long hop from recalling the ancestors as the 'wandering Aramaean' as we've heard in the lesson from Deuteronomy, and Moses leading the children of Israel through the parted waters of the sea only for those to be closed in on the drowning Egyptian army – and for the Israelites to be quite thankful for that – to Joshua waging a 'holy war' in taking possession of the land, killing women and children and animals when he took Jericho and other cities; to a fully worked concept of holy crusade or Jihad.

These sort of questions racked Christian thinkers from early days. Not least in questions of violence against the person, and transferring that into dealing with conflict as a nation. Ambrose and Augustine, and later Aquinas developed the Just War theory... based on the assumption that, however regrettable, people are sinful and war will happen. Therefore it is better to have guidance about limiting war, rather than a free-for-all.

It stated principles about going *to* war

- Its key principles are that war must only be a last resort.
- War must have legitimate authority.
- It must be waged to redress a wrong – that is, have a 'right intention' and seek to re-establish peace.
- It must have reasonable chance of success; not endanger lives foolishly.

And it stated principles about conduct *in* war:

- The means of war – the violence used – must be proportional to injury it is intended to avert: and
- non-combatants should be protected insofar as humanly possible.

Things become much more grey when you deal with things on a national scale. But we're still using Just War Theory to justify actions.

When politicians say that talks have broken down, is that really the *last* resort? And what constitutes legitimate authority? The UN is clear enough that its authority is required other than for self-defence, but not everyone feel obliged to bow to UN authority. We know they have a fearful weight of decision-making to carry, but Ted Heath as a lone voice on the Tory benches holding out for the need for UN authority, when Tony Benn and Tam Dayliel were unfolding a suspicion about interests in oil from the opposition benches. It is a fine line that is trod.

And in a very changed world, success may be seen in military terms in specific provinces or operations and indeed in building up limited control for local government, but the nature of hostility has changed so much from the world in which Just War theory was developed. Traditional methods of engaging in war are not taken for granted any more. The perception of who is a combatant and who is a non-combatant on *both* sides has taken a cultural shift.

When Just War theory was developed, wars were relatively confined. It was easier to know who was fighting who, who was in charge, calling the shots. Everything was more immediate, the technology understandable, even if terrifying in its own way even then.

Now, we're not so sure. We need long-running enquiries to hope to get a glimpse of the truth, but maybe not the real truth, about legitimation of war – and the complexity of global alliances leaves doors open for human corruption.

The technology is mind-boggling, yet with awesome room still for human error, because in any situation of intense stress there will always be human error, and increased power, speed of delivery and all the rest will only exaggerate its devastating affects.

While those directly involved in any field of engagement no doubt feel the effects of what goes on in a real way and need all the support we can offer, the rest of us in the armchair theatre are confronted with the coolness of political diversions: the word 'collateral' has become an affront to the image of the body of Christ where each part feels the affect on the other.

These things are never easy. They are based on an assumption of human sin and inevitability of violence. The question is whether that needs to be so and whether Christianity really has anything fundamentally different to say to that. Epidemiologists, the ones who do the cool statistics and take the emotive side out of things, have indicated that wars tend to generate themselves. They appear in clusters, where war has been waged before and the idea may be taken for granted.

I have a small picture of a child bearing a gun, a child drafted into an army. It bears the caption, "Is there no other way?" That is an image which has haunted me for many years and next week I will consider an approach based on different assumptions about humanity, that of Christian pacifism.