

Christian Responses to Conflict and Violence - 2

Sermon by Revd Deryck Collingwood on Lent 2

Last week, in the first of these sermons on Christian responses to conflict and violence, I focussed on the way we usually take things to be: accepting that hostility and war is almost inevitable and asking how we keep it under control: how we justify going to war and try to limit the effects of conflict within it – the two aspects of what is commonly known as Just War Theory. I also asked if this approach can really hold today in the very different world from which it was created in medieval times.

Today I want to explore the other strand in Christian tradition, that of pacifism. People speak of a spectrum of opinion on these things: from a thoroughgoing militarist viewpoint at one end that says of course it's ok to resolve things by violence, to a thoroughgoing pacifist viewpoint at the other, which would be totally resistant to any violence. Most people will probably find themselves somewhere between, depending on the circumstances or the type of force that is being proposed, or whatever it is that brings the concept of 'justifying' an action into play.

Some will accept conventional war but be strongly opposed to the use of nuclear arms. I don't have time here to go explore that issue properly, but I will say for myself that I have never heard a convincing argument in favour of weapons of mass destruction of any description – most of which are banned of course under the Hague and other conventions – nor, from a Christian or any moral point of view, of deterrence.

As I see it, apart from the clear issue of lack of proportionality (under Just War theory), you simply cannot expect other people to comply with non-proliferation treaties when you are the ones holding the trump cards and refusing to negotiate on anything like the level; it's a simple form of bullying when it comes to it, that will continue to divide. And that to my mind is contrary to a gospel of reconciliation and the concept of 'koinonia' or 'communion' that is the binding force behind the formation of the church.

And how do we expect the poor of the world to respond when we say we wish to spend £20 billion on weapons that are only valid as a deterrent if we *intend* to use them, but on the other hand knowing they *cannot* be used or we fail ourselves as well as those we see as aggressors or enemies? So when Jesus sets out his stall at Nazareth in the words of Isaiah, 'He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives', what are we, as those who wish to follow, to say to him?

But let me come back to Pacifism as such. For the last 1,700 years, most Christians have found the pacifist stance difficult, maybe naive, even unacceptable. I say that because it was of course in the 4th century that Christianity in effect became a state religion after the conversion of Constantine. Thereafter its status changed in many ways, not least in relation to service in the army; by the end of that century the whole Roman army was nominally Christian.

National churches are inevitably compromised in what can be said; they become politicised. Many will remember the Church of England report 'The Church and the Bomb' in 1982, which came down heavily against nuclear arms and deterrence. Basing its argument on Just War theory, it brushed aside the first three centuries of

the church, stating very simply, 'It is not easy to establish what was the Christian attitude to war as such in the first three centuries of the Christian era, because for a variety of reasons Christians normally abstained from military service'...

...which was a total fudge, because many Christian writers mention conflict during that time. And it is very clear from all of them that for three centuries, Christians were expected *not* to engage in any form of violence, let alone sign up with the army, which is one very significant reason why they sometimes found themselves in so much trouble with the Roman authorities.

Prior to 'The Church and the Bomb' report, a series of Lambeth Conferences, from 1930 till 1978, denounced war as incompatible with the teaching and example of Jesus, and the use of violence as contradictory to the gospel. For all of that, the churches were and are nonetheless expected to support military endeavours and live with the tension. Reinhold Neibuhr was happy to say that 'the ethic of Jesus was uncompromisingly pacifist', but he did so trying to persuade people that the rest of us are simply not up to living that way and we should not begin to think we can emulate his example.

And that really is the crunch question, I think. Are we asked to follow the example of Jesus?

Many will say it is our task simply to believe that he is the Son of God and give thanks for what he has done for us – that the ethical demands of the gospel are secondary. But the call to his disciples, first to follow and then to take up their own cross *in the following*, raises questions for us all. For it was not only the first disciples who were so called. It was those who followed them in those first centuries also, who made tough choices and suffered badly for their faith, and who in the earliest years were known not as 'Christians' but as followers of 'The Way'.

Jesus says that peacemakers will be called 'children of God' – in other words that they will be heirs and grow to become more like God... and that those who suffer for righteousness' sake will be blessed also. Where does that Way point us?

There in the Sermon on the Mount he also tells his disciples to love their enemies, to carry the belligerent soldier's kit a second mile when they were duty-bound only to carry it for one. He tells them to remove the plank from their own eye before judging others who have a speck in their own; and to forgive seventy-times-seven times. He tells them not simply to *limit* violence in the 'eye-for-eye, tooth-for-tooth' prescription handed down in Jewish wisdom, but not to retaliate at all.

In commanding them to love neighbour as well as God, he surprises them with a story of who the neighbour truly is – the unlikely Samaritan – and he accepts gentiles who turn to him in faith every bit as much as he accepts Jews.

His response was not totally new. He built on what the old prophets had done in criticising the kings and judges: insisting that God required mercy and compassion and that we should trust in the ultimate power of God rather than in human might... setting a vision of a kingdom of peace where all might come together as one under God our common Father.

When he fed the 5000, we are told they wanted to crown him king; their Messiah had at last revealed himself. They sat there on the hillside in military grouping of 50s and 100s; it was time to send a warning message to Rome. But he refused to be drawn.

In today's Gospel (Lk 13) we hear of his lament over Jerusalem and despair at their slowness to know the ways of peace, and when he arrived there we hear that he wept at the sight, and chose to enter the city not a white charger, but on a donkey, to fulfil the vision of peace in Zechariah 9.

We know all this and we know the consequences – at least for him. Was Jesus just an unrealistic dreamer? No, he was more pragmatic than that. He knew the consequences himself. He was also realistic that there would always be wars and rumours of wars. He knew that the rulers of the world would continue to lord it over their subjects. But it was not to be so with his followers. They were to be a beacon set on a hill, the leaven in the dough, *in* this world but not *of* it.

And as such, they would suffer divisions, even within their own families, pierced with the proverbial sword promised to Mary, as they responded to his vision of a wider kingdom – called as 'living stones', in the words of 1 Peter, 'to be built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood', renouncing a way of life that feeds the spiral of violence... called 'to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'.

Paul, of course, knew that conversion in extreme, caught in that marvellous light on the Damascus road; turning from virulent persecutor to ardent champion of inclusion for the sake of the Kingdom: 'no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free'. 'Live peaceably with all, never avenge yourselves, for vengeance belongs to God'. 'Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good'.

It sounds like a different world to what we have become accustomed to since the time of Constantine. In the end of the day it is a question of who we *trust*. Do we have any *real* sense of the power of God at work in Christ?

Is the message of the Gospel some nice fantasy that's good to help us keep a sense of aspiration, but ultimately unrealistic? Or does the Son of the God whom we proclaim as creator of all that is, actually know something of what ultimately works in this world? – works for our good?

Perhaps it is especially hard to island nations like our own to grow to trust others – heavens, we seem to find it hard enough even amongst the provinces. But our vision is perhaps too small by far. When a child's parent is killed in conflict, it takes a lot for them to find forgiveness for the next generation.

A college friend of mine said starkly, 'Jesus could have been a politician, but he chose to do something different'. For order in this world, as we know it, is not necessarily the opposite of chaos. Rather, political order can be the means by which a system of chaos for the poor among the nations is maintained. And the church too can blend in and so easily look like everyone else trying to maintain what we've become used to.

But perhaps, just perhaps, *consciously* walking the way of the cross, doing and being 'something different', like a salty counter-culture in this world, offers the only way of breaking this perennial cycle of violence that it appears we have come to accept as inevitable. But that comes first from the heart, and that I shall turn to next week.