

Sunday, 6 November 2016

[Remembrance Sunday](#)

Issues of war have often been difficult for Christians and we have often not been of one mind. Jesus' words to us about enemies were quite plain: Jesus says in Matthew ch 5:38-44, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ... "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

These teachings led the early church father Tertullian to say in 204,

"I think we must first inquire whether warfare is proper at all for Christians... Should it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in battle when it does not even become him to sue at the law courts? And shall he apply the chain, and the prison, and the torture, and the punishment who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs? ... Shall he keep guard before the [pagan] temples which he has renounced? ... And shall he diligently protect by night those who in daytime he has put to flight by his exorcisms, leaning and resting on the spear with which Christ's side was pierced? ... You may see by a slight survey how many other offences are involved in the performance of military officers

which we must hold to involve a transgression of God's law." (De Corona IX).

For Tertullian, and many other early Christians, the war and violence of the Roman Empire were not something the Christian was permitted to partake in.

That early question about war had to do with the occupation of a Roman soldier. It was probably a question because Christians indeed were soldiers and it created a bit of controversy. Some even speculate that Christianity spread through the empire partly by Christian soldiers. The issue was somewhat contentious because there are a few positive interactions with Jesus and Roman soldiers- in Luke 7 Jesus heals a soldier's servant and praises his faith; and similarly John the Baptist speaks to soldiers in Luke 3 and advises them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages". Neither Jesus, nor John, advised them to quit their position as soldiers (though we're not entirely sure what to make of that silence).

In the Early Church the issue of war had to do mainly with whether it was okay to be a soldier or not. Christians didn't really have much power to consider war and violence on a mass scale until after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity in 380. Before this Christians lived in the empire, but they really didn't have any power. The empire felt the need to use violence to maintain the empire. They felt they had to squash rebellions internally and to fight enemies who attacked the empire externally. Suddenly, there was a need for a Christian understanding of how a "Christian" empire can use violence.

Here is where St. Augustine put his mind to work. He imagines the parable of the Good Samaritan. There is a man travelling on the road who is attacked, robbed, and left for dead. A priest and a religious person pass by, not helping the man, but someone you wouldn't expect to help is the one who helps the man bleeding and dying in the ditch. Jesus uses this story to talk about loving your neighbour. St. Augustine wonders what would happen if the Good Samaritan came upon the man as he was getting attacked. How would the good neighbour respond? Surely the good neighbour wouldn't look away and ignore the beating. He came to the conclusion that we could separate outward actions from inward dispositions. So in defense of my neighbour I may actually kill the attacker, but inwardly my actual motivation was to protect my neighbour. I did not want to kill the attacker. It was a kind of accidental consequence that occurred as I was defending my neighbour. So to St. Augustine the sin to be found in a war is really internal- it is to be found in motivation and inward disposition. The act of killing is somewhat neutral since all humans die anyway. It is the inward disposition that motivates the act that determines if the act is moral or not. If I am motivated by a desire to protect the innocent rather than out of a desire for cruelty and violence, then I am justified in killing.

On top of this, St. Augustine believed that the social order we exist in is part of the natural order ordained by God to give us stable and peaceful lives. God meant society to be organized under rulers. Jesus' words to us as individual Christians about how we treat our enemies are perhaps not applicable to the ruler of a country when considering defending their people against an aggressive military force. So we read in Romans 13:1,4 that

“...authorities that exist have been instituted by God... the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.”

And in 1 Peter 2:14, Peter describes “governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good”.

So, according to this way of thinking, God meant for there to be empires and kingdoms. Since God placed these authorities over us, we are to obey rightful authority. In fact, according to this theory, since God ordained this order, obedience to the rightful ruler is actually obedience to God himself to some degree. It is the duty of the ruler to maintain order and peace and at times this means war. If order and peace in a nation are part of God's will, then it also becomes God's will to partake in war which seems necessary to maintain that order and peace. War in itself is not good. It is something that causes bloodshed and suffering, but it seems to be necessary to maintain the peace and order of the state, which is what God wants for his people. War is really a means to an end. And, in this case it is believed that the end justifies the means. For the sake of maintaining peace and order war is permitted.

This does not mean that St. Augustine was bloodthirsty. He wanted to create a way of figuring out when it is necessary to go to war. He put together a [theory of Just War](#) at a time when his people were being killed and raped by foreign armies. He spelled out principles, which are still used today, under which a nation can justly go to war. Augustine clearly saw it as a last resort to be used only when all other means have failed and when the other nation compels a defensive response. War is always used as the lesser of two evils. The suffering and evil of

not defending and allowing the enemy to destroy at will with no opposition is seen as too great an evil to endure. The suffering of war would be less than the suffering of not going to war. Entering into war amounts to less evil overall.

It is a compelling argument that Augustine put together. It helped the empire to resolve the conflict. And it should be said that to go against this theory is to go against the vast majority of Christians throughout history (as CS Lewis' essay *Why I Am Not a Pacifist* explains, which is found in the collection *The Weight of Glory*).

But, there are problems with it. I will give two examples. First, as theologian Stanley Hauerwas once said, "I just want to know when the Just War theory has led Christians to say 'no' to a war". Just War Theory often provides a way of justifying wars, but doesn't really ever seem to have the power to prevent a nation from entering into war.

A second problem with the theory is that it separates our motivations from our actions. Jesus taught that our actions flow from our inward dispositions. The act of adultery begins through the lust in our heart. Murder begins through the anger in our heart. If we love our enemy our actions will flow from that disposition, our actions will not contradict our inward disposition. Loving our enemy is turning the other cheek and doing good to those who hate us. It seems strange to see an act of inward love expressed through a balled fist swung at an enemy's nose, even if a greater motivation to defend our neighbour is within us. When we separate our inward dispositions from our outward actions we start down a

dangerous road. When two Christian soldiers on opposite sides meet on the battlefield what does Jesus ask them to do? It's easier to generalize and think of countries, but to think of individuals on the battlefield is not as easy.

Most of us will not be practically involved in deciding whether our country should go to war. So what can we do here and now? As disciples of Christ we are called to be peacemakers. To be a peacemaker means willing to be in the thick of conflict. Being a peacemaker sounds nice and gentle, but it means being with those who want to harm each other. We are not permitted as Christians to ignore conflict. And if possible, we are to participate in a way that violence doesn't have to become a realistic option. It also means being realistic about the sin inside each of us that can lead to war.

The theologian Robert Brimlow in his book "What about Hitler?" imagines how the World Wars might have been prevented. How might we have prevented the Holocaust? He says, "the answer surely lies in being a peacemaking church long before the holocaust ever began. The church should have preached and lived a love of the Jews for many centuries before the twentieth; the church should have formed Christians into the kind of people who do not kill Jews, or homosexuals, or gypsies, or communists, or other Christians, or Nazis, or whoever else was victimized by the war. The church should have lived and taught in such a way that the First World War would have been incomprehensible in a largely Christian Europe and, failing that, should have railed against the Versailles Treaty and the

vengeance it embodied in favor of forgiveness and reconciliation. The failure of the church and of Christians to be peacemakers in 1942 is horrible precisely because it is a result and culmination of centuries of failure." [\[1\]](#)

... Those are hard words to hear.

He is telling us that the next World War might be prevented by our serious and intense discipleship to Christ right now. The sacrifice we expect of our soldiers, we have to be willing to make for the Gospel. The seriousness and vigor with which we try to live as people of the kingdom right now, is precisely what the world needs to prevent future wars.

We don't know what lies in the future, but if human history is any indication of the future we can expect that war will continue to be a part of human reality for the time being. We have choices now. The violence, hatred, suffering, and sacrifice that we remember as a part of war is a part of each one of us. The seeds of war lie dormant in each one of us. When someone offends us we are given the opportunity to practice peace by not shooting hurtful words back at them. When we see someone being hurt by someone else we are being given the opportunity to be a peacemaker. When we are tempted to lash out in anger at others we are being given the opportunity to destroy that seed of war within us. Perhaps it is possible to prevent some future violence by being people of the Kingdom right here, right now, being salt and light to those around us.

The Just War theory Tells us that war is an evil, but it amounts to less evil than not going to war. But perhaps we can live now in a way that war becomes an obsolete idea for humanity. As

Christians perhaps we can live in such a way that we so influence our world that our children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren don't have to know the violence and loss that so many past generations have known.

Past generations should be remembered for not taking the easy way out, and for being willing to die to do something about the suffering they saw. We need a similar sacrificial spirit in following Jesus' ways of the kingdom. The peaceful world the prophet Micah speaks of, where the people of the world "will hammer their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks; [and] Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they train for war." That world will come about as God works through us- When the Sin that infects us and causes war is fully healed by the work of Jesus- and we are transformed into people who see each other as God's children- brothers and sisters of Christ under one Father.

It is important to remember the suffering. It is important to remember the high cost of war- then and now. It is important to remember how fragile peace can be. It is important to remember the monsters that live inside of us. It is important to remember the sacrifices of those who tried to do something about the suffering because to sit back and do nothing was a worse evil. It is also important to remember Jesus' call to us to be people of the kingdom- and the suffering and self-sacrifice it takes to live it.

Amen