

THE DISTURBING PEACE OF GOD

*'Being Peacemakers: taking up Jesus' call', World Youth Day events,
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Some might say that peacemaking is not the business of the Church, which should confine itself to the sacristy and to leave issues of war, violence and peacemaking to the politicians. Yet we know that Christ came announcing God's peace to all peoples. And so we cannot avoid concluding that this is part of the core business of the churches as a whole, but also of all of us as individuals, along with people of other beliefs we might add.

Yet we also know that Australia joined the United States and Britain in the invasion of Iraq against the vehement opposition of Pope John Paul II and all the leading bishops' conferences throughout the world, along with the leaders of other churches and of many millions of people worldwide. How can we have gone into this war, with these three countries being the heartland western democracies founded on Christian social traditions? We know clearly now that we were not told the truth and many people were misled into believing the deceitful war propaganda.

What should we learn from this? First, as so often in the past, we must be vigilant of politicians or others who wrap themselves in the flag of nationalism. We must demand an account of those involved in what may now be considered a classic conspiracy to invade Iraq. In Australia we have barely begun this process of accountability.

Second, why did we fail to prevent this catastrophic misadventure into Iraq, the consequences of which will last for many years? Is it that many of us as Christians have grown lazy or complacent about issues of war and peace? After all, the Catholic and other churches have been some of the main institutions in western history trying to constrain violence, particularly by its major contributions to the just war ethic. Yet how many of us seriously study the morality of war and peacemaking, including effective methods of non-violent action and the development of international law? Where were our Christian intellectuals and writers able to contribute strongly in these areas? We have some, of course, but not nearly as many as one would expect.

Clearly we need to do much better in the future. We must become better informed, see peace-making as part of our mission in life and take a more prominent role in public debate.

Peace on earth

We give Christ the title, 'Prince of peace'. At the birth of Jesus, the angels sang 'Peace on earth to people of good will'. And after his Resurrection, the first words of Jesus to his disciples were 'Peace be with you'. Given the context, this is not just some simple greeting, but a Word from God full of great intensity.

Yet we can easily miss the meaning, since it almost sounds too casual in English. We are more likely to understand peace as a personal disposition of mind and heart. It is a soft word in English, not one with sharp and piercing edges. But for Jesus, the word peace expressed the Mystery of God giving direction to our entire lives.

The Hebrew word, *shalom*, that we translate as peace, has a wide range of meanings in the Old Testament. The root of the word means wholeness or wellbeing; *shalom* embraced total human wellbeing, in both a spiritual and a material sense, including health and prosperity, and good relationships among people. The opposite of *shalom* is not simply violence or war, but whatever damages or destroys human and social wellbeing.

Jesus uses the term *shalom* to express God's unveiling of himself in Jesus, inviting us into an intimate relationship with God as our Father, and intimacy also with other human beings, even enemies, who are also made in the image of God. 'You have heard it said: 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy''. But I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Mt 5: 43-44).

Peace with God impels us to be people of peace and wellbeing for and with others, especially those in trouble or distress, the 'poor' as the Bible calls them. The message is repeated many times in the Gospels, most graphically in the Last Judgement scene in Matthew 25 – when did we see you hungry, sick or in prison? - and the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God' (Mt 5, 1-12).

Yet we also recognise that some passages in the Scriptures are deeply ambiguous. At times God is depicted commanding war and destruction. How do we explain this? I think we can see throughout the Old Testament a growing moral sense and development in human consciousness even about who God is.

Yet some passages in the New Testament are also difficult to interpret. Take Jesus saying: 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Mt: 10, 34). Such a passage has to be interpreted in its context, which referred specifically to distress within Jewish families when members became Christians. Matthew was also exhorting them to remain steadfast in the face of persecution. Nevertheless, it is no wonder that there have been long debates among Christians about the use of violence.

Early Church

For the first Christians, the question of engaging in warfare did not arise since they shared the exemption from military service of the Jews. But early Christian writings record strong opposition to the use of violence, including military service. They accepted the full force of God's command not to kill. It is as if they sensed the revulsion God must feel when an innocent person especially suffers violence.

However this intense conviction against the use of violence faced a dilemma about how to protect the innocent against unjust violence? The evidence from the first Christian centuries is not entirely clear, but by the early second century it seems significant numbers of Christians served in the army in some areas. Particularly after the official recognition of Christianity in the fourth century, many Christians felt obliged to defend the Roman Empire, and hence joined the army, though it also combined the function of a police force.

But the strong presumption against the use of violence remained, and soldiers who shed blood were expected to do severe penances. The dilemma remained about how to restrain violence and yet protect the innocent against unjust attack.

After the invasions of the Germanic warrior tribes, fighting was endemic, and it took centuries to constrain violence at a time when warfare was regarded as a source of honour and prestige. In this context Christian thinkers, drawing from older Roman writers and Christian texts, slowly developed what we now call the just war ethic, in an attempt to minimise violence while attempting to ensure some justice and to protect the weak.

The crusades and the burden of history

Over centuries, the Germanic tribes were converted to various versions of Christianity, and reinterpreted the Scriptures through their own cultural lenses. Honour and prestige won in battle were supreme values in these cultures. However, the values of non-violence survived and were symbolised especially in the lives of monks, nuns and clergy.

Unfortunately the Church ominously endorsed the crusades, with some of the popes commanding rulers to make war, even in the name of faith. Passages from the Old Testament, in particular, but also some passages in the Gospels themselves, were cherry-picked to justify the emerging crusade ideology.

Hence the use of violence became commonplace in Christian history, involving

- the many crusades which lasted over five centuries,
- the persecution of other Christians or people of other faiths,
- the various wars of religion,
- the Inquisition, and
- differing degrees of involvement in the colonial conquests.

These events grossly deformed Christ's message, as Pope John Paul II acknowledged in his landmark apologies before the new millennium. In 1994 he had said: 'How can we be silent about so many kinds of violence perpetrated in the name of the faith? Religious wars, courts of the Inquisition, and other violations of the rights of the human person...?'

John Paul repeatedly insisted that violence must never be used to spread religion. He reiterated in 2002: 'To kill in the name of God is a blasphemy and a perversion of religion.'

This was not a new message from John Paul. The Vatican Council in 1965 had called for an entirely new attitude towards war, and praised those who chose the path of non-violence in defence of their rights. In Ireland in 1979 Pope John Paul spoke with great passion against violence: 'I proclaim with the conviction of my faith in Christ and with the awareness of my mission that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems... Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity of life, the freedom of human beings.'

While Pope John Paul vehemently opposed the Iraq war, he did not abandon the just war tradition, but he insisted that it had become increasingly difficult to justify warfare in modern conditions, though he did allow for humanitarian interventions to protect the innocent, as in Bosnia, Kosovo or East Timor. At the same time, he encouraged Catholics and others to embrace non-violent means in defence of human rights, as he himself had demonstrated in Poland and Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

Wherever we stand on the spectrum, as pacifists rejecting any use of violence, or within the just war tradition, reluctantly conceding the need for violence to protect the innocent, we must be much more intelligent, articulate and vigorous in our efforts to secure peace and wellbeing for everyone on our planet. Especially must we protest vehemently when the just war criteria are perverted and used as pretexts by unscrupulous rulers.

Christ did not wish us merely an inward peace. Christ's promise of peace is also an insistent summons to help transform our world so everyone can live in dignity.