

ON THE BRINK OF WAR

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Today our country is on the brink of war. In 27 years of ministry it has been my sad duty to preach about a number of the conflicts in which this country has been involved, the Falklands, the Gulf War, Afghanistan. I have to say I have never known a conflict when the churches have been so united in their view that it was unjust.

This war is quite different from other recent conflicts. The First Gulf War and the Falklands War were responses to invasions. The attack on Afghanistan was a response to September 11th. This war is different. No-one has been attacked. No evidence of imminent threat has been established. Peaceful options for resolving the conflict do not appear to have been exhausted. The attack has not been sanctioned by the United Nations and there is a real possibility it is a violation of international law. As for the consequences none of us can be certain. But already great damage has been done to the international institutions on which our security depends. Even if the war can be won quickly the most likely outcome looks likely to be either a western presence in Iraq that will have to remain for several years or a broken and chaotic state. Either possibility looks good for al'Qa'ida.

It is for these reasons that the British churches have taken the view that this war is unjust. So too have the churches in the United States. As you will know George W Bush is a Methodist. His Bishop says this of the war: "It is inconceivable that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour and the Prince of Peace, would support this proposed attack". The United Church of Christ says: We firmly oppose war when diplomatic measures are available for the resolution of differences. Or this Robert Edgar, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in America to President Bush "Your church leaders have sought private hearings with you to express their passionate objections; they've been denied. If Jesus Christ truly 'changed your heart' as you have said, let Him change your mind." Listen to this from President Jimmy Carter. "As a Christian and as a president who was severely provoked by international crises, I became thoroughly familiar with the principles of a just war, and it is clear that a substantially unilateral attack on Iraq does not meet these standards.

When you start a war you never know how many will die. You have to be able to justify what you are doing, politically and morally, and also before God. I do not believe such a case has been made. For me the war is unjust. It may well be there are some people here who take a different view. It is matter of judgement and none of us can be certain that our judgement is right. But if we cannot all agree, at least we must think charitably about each other. A long time ago, in a time of bitter division, the chaplain of Oliver Cromwell's army wrote, 'Let us not assume any power of infallibility towards each other, for another's truth is as dark to me as mine is to him - until the Lord enlighten us both.'

Can I suggest 5 responses to this war, which I hope every Christian will be able to agree with whatever we may think of the war itself.

Firstly at this moment our prayers go out to everyone who is going to be personally involved in this conflict. That concern begins clearly with our armed forces and those of the United States. Whatever we may think of this war they fight in our name and our prayers go with

them. God speed them home to us. But our prayers go out to everyone else involved in this conflict, to our political leaders, and to the people of Iraq who are going to suffer the horrors of war.

Secondly whatever happens with this war it must not become a war of religions. Someone once said "there can be no peace in the world until there is peace between the religions of the world". We must not whatever we do allow this to become a conflict between Christian and Moslem. I happen to know that Churches Together in Britain and Ireland are working on a joint statement which they hope to issue jointly with the Moslem Council of Great Britain. That is absolutely the right response. We need to hold out the hand of welcome and friendship towards our Islamic brothers and sisters.

Thirdly we need to use this moment to deepen our hatred of the horror and obscenity of war. None of us know how many thousands, or tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands will die. In the last Gulf War 100,000 died. This time it may be less or more. But let me tell you one death is too many for someone. I read sometime ago of an American airman who fought in the Gulf War. He found himself after the ceasefire on the road between Kuwait and Iraq where in the last stages of the war retreating Iraqi troops had been shot to pieces by Allied firepower. He says that for him the real tragedy of war came down to one image, he said, and I quote "there amid all the wreckage, all those bodies, I saw one dead Iraqi soldier. He had been in full retreat from Kuwait City and in his hand was a box and in the box was a little girl's dress." He said, "probably he stole it but that did not matter. What mattered was who that dress might have been for. What mattered was that a child in Iraq who knows nothing of why wars are waged will wait in vain for her father to come home. I know this man was sent to kill me" he said, "probably against his will but he was not just a reluctant soldier. He was also a father and now he is dead and this is war". War is by nature obscene.

Fourthly we need to resolve to get our churches more deeply involved deepen our involvement with the search for peace and justice. There is a danger in church life. Yes when a war comes yes we are concerned with the affairs of nations. But much of the time we prefer the quiet life. Of all the great gangsters perhaps the most fearsome of them all was Al Capone. When Al Capone was on the hoof in Chicago, it was said that the cops did not just look the other way; they went in and did the burgling. When Capone had the whole law-enforcement structure of the city eating out of the palm of his hand, his constant refrain was "we don't want no trouble". Most of the time that's how it is. Which of us would not rather try to avoid the grimier realities? Who has never put off a difficult decision in the hope that it would go away? Of as someone put it; "You've heard about Jehovah's Witnesses. I'd prefer to be a Jehovah's by-stander".

If you don't want war waiting till the day before the declaration to get concerned isn't an option. You have to remove some of the deep causes of war before you get to that last minute crisis. Today we are rightly concerned about the weapons of mass destruction held by the Iraqi regime. That is a legitimate and real concern. But then ask yourself what was the source and origin of these weapons. Well partly this country. Last week we've learnt how Margaret Thatcher's Government evaded sanctions to sell a chlorine plant to Iraq explicitly knowing it could be used for chemical weapons. And why? Well as the Trade minister put it at the time "A ban would do our trade prospects in Iraq no good". Today we are worried by the possibility that Iraq might be developing nuclear weapons. Who sold them the nuclear technology, knowing explicitly that had no need of it for power production and it was almost certainly part of the weapons programme. Same with America- when Iraq was our ally against

Iran America armed Saddam. Which reminds me of a joke. The U.N. Secretary General asks George Bush: "Mr President, what proof do you have that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction?" Bush replies: "We kept the receipts."

The Churches we have a social agenda not just when wars come but all the time. The arms trade, the poverty that breeds violence, combating unjust regimes, supporting the United Nations - this is part of the church agenda. Last year I was coming back on the train from the General Assembly at York. And two other delegates were in front of me talking. "What do you make of Church and Society?" asked one. "Never really get involved in that" said the other "Not really the kind of thing I'm interested in". Social Justice questions are not an optional extra like flower arranging. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" is not an optional extra. As William Sloane Coffin says "Christians everywhere must stop retreating from the giant social issues of the day into the pygmy world of private piety".

And then lastly in the face of the present darkness, let us deepen our life with God. This is not one of those times when it's easy to be optimistic about the future. Without question the world is getting a more dangerous place. We've entered a new age, but it is not the one we hoped for. This age includes snipers and terrorists, worrying violence, added security, but no certainty about who or when or how the next tragedy may come. In this kind of world it's hard to keep on hoping and not be overwhelmed by despair.

Tragic times call for us to find new meaning, renewed purpose and most of all, a rebirth of all that is really important for the soul to survive and come alive. Believing in God now is not some kind of optional extra to life – it is the only way we can find a lasting hope. Says the Psalmist "God turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water". If we going to believe in a right future we need to find the God who wills it for us. If we going to keep hope alive, we have to keep faith alive.

As we come to this end of the service let me remind you of the source of our hope. "Come behold the works of the Lord. He makes war to cease to the end of the earth: he breaks the bow and shatters the spear: he burns the shields with fire. Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us: The God of Jacob is our refuge".

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