

## Anzac day – A Christian stance on War

Tuesday is ANZAC Day. On 25th April 1916, the first Anzac Day was held in London in remembrance of a great deed by those who died at Gallipoli ... almost 3,000 New Zealanders and 9,000 Australians lost their lives.

On ANZAC Day, people from Australia & New Zealand are asked to stop and remember the men and women who fought, and especially those who died, for our countries in war. It seems to me that this is a good thing to do, because for most of the other 364 days in the year, I am probably not that mindful of these men and women who sacrificed their lives for me.

A couple of years ago I read a book by Bryce Courtney and it was based around WW1 and Gallipoli, the emotions that went through me as I read it surprised me, the commitment, the waste, the courage, the stupidity, the pain and sense of pride I felt through the men who served. Obviously I have no idea what it was like but Courtney did an excellent job of taking me there in my imagination and it impacted me, it helped me appreciate in a small way what I have today.

I remember when I was a teen thinking that we are in a time of peace – Yes there were no World wars, but I was a bit naive as far as all the other smaller conflicts that were going on.

It seems today that we are presented daily with stories of war and conflict, with inevitable associated tragedy. The emotions that went through me when I watched the effects of chemical weapons in Syria a couple of weeks back, the questions that fill my mind when USA responded and then the nervousness I feel when I see North Korea parading their weapons.

For some, war is a valid response to some of the atrocities in our world. For others, there can never be anything that justifies war. It just seems to go against everything that Jesus teaches and how he lived his life.

My question today is - Is there a correct Christian response to war and conflict in our world? Can Scripture help us out? I think it is timely for us to think about this issue in the light of what is happening in our world. And I have tapped into some of Mick Duncan's thoughts that he presented in the Baptist magazine last year.

### **It's complex!**

One of the things that I have discovered as I have been in leadership is that when there is an issue, the answer is seldom simple. Over recent years in NZ

churches there has been plenty of discussion around gay marriage, one of the things that concerned me were those who just said, it's simple, just do this.... I heard it again just last week when discussing the reoffending of those who had been in prison. Several different people all said it was simple, but each pointed to a different area that need to be addressed. Big issues are never simple.

War and conflict is similar, it is an issue that cannot be dealt with lightly and requires real engagement rather than superficial judgements. I hope to cover the issues and present from both sides, so 'hold your fire' if you have differing views... hopefully we'll get to those.

### **Some statistics**

The statistics on war and conflict are truly disturbing. We need to remind ourselves that behind all the numbers is someone's son, daughter, and family. War is not just an issue of facts and figures, it's about people.

- Desmond Tutu claims that every year, small arms alone kill more people than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki put together.
- For countries in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, conflict represents an annual average of \$US22b spent on arms. That money could have enabled those countries to put every child in school and to reduce child mortality rates.
- The Red Cross notes that in some conflict zones in Africa, up to 90% of the casualties are civilians, mostly women and children.
- There are more horrific statistics about women and girls that I don't want to say out loud. Sadly there is today a strong 'victim bias' against women and girls in conflict zones.

### **War theories**

So why do we go to war when it inevitably leads to so much pain, not to mention the waste of resources?

There are a number of theories.

- One argues that the male sex drive is to blame for most of the world's conflicts; the 'male warrior' instinct which programmes men to be aggressive towards anyone they view as an outsider.

- Some point to the increase of conflict during periods of extreme weather as a factor. Certainly I know that my patience was a lot less when working in Bangladesh in extremely hot and humid conditions.
- Another suggests that war results from simple escalation. Two parties, each believing the other has acted wrongly, and then responding with equal force (although typically that's 40% more force than they experienced). We see that work out in our children when they get into an argument. The Vietnam conflict was probably an example of this and the Syrian situation could end up in this situation.
- War can also be a commentary on a nation's history. If, for example, a nation has unfinished business around its own historical domestic conflicts, lack of closure may result in a toxicity that turns quickly to anger. An unhealed past can determine actions in the present. We see this in people, so why not in collectives of people (nations)?
- Atheists will of course blame religion
- and of course Christians will want to add (in my opinion rightly so), that behind the scenes there's always the influence of Satan (the accuser/confuser) and the dark mysteries of sin.

### **Scripture and war**

This brings us to the question of Scripture and war. In the beginning (Genesis) - prior to the fall – and at the end (Revelation), war is not part of the ideal picture being presented. In the sandwich, however, we have mixed messages.

- Deuteronomy gives rules of engagement on conduct in war.
- The Joshua story has God being part of the plan of war.
- Isaiah prophesied spears being turned into ploughshares and
- Micah talks of shalom, where everyone can sit under their fig tree in safety and well-being.
- In Matthew's Gospel, we are told not to resist an evil person and to love our enemy,
- and yet in the Gospel of Luke, soldiers are told to be good soldiers and not to give up their profession.

Nowhere in the New Testament is war-making included in the list of activities that are incompatible with Christian profession. While this is an overly brief look, it suggests that we need to be cautious in pronouncing that Scripture

supports a particular position for a just war, pacifism, or any points in-between.

### **Three stances towards war.**

When I have taught on this type of topic with youth I would at this stage get them all to stand up and position themselves on a spectrum from 'pacifism' through to 'just war' and then get them to say why they are standing there, and try to convince others in other positions to join them. It's a great way to look at the issues around our understanding of a Christian response to war. But I wonder how it would go if I did that in a church in Syria, where family and friends will be fighting and loss of life is all around them. These debates are about real people.

Where would you position yourself? Are you a 'pacifist' or do your sympathies lie with a 'just war', or would you favour the newer 'pre-emptive' stance. What should the Christian position be? First of all let me define these terms, Mick Duncan has done all the work here.

### **Pacifism**

Pacifism is a most misunderstood position. It is often interpreted as being completely passive, possibly because Jesus says we are "not to resist an evil person" (Matthew 5:39). But is this restriction really saying that in the face of an enemy, the Christian response should be one of non-resistance, letting an enemy walk all over us?

As I have mentioned many times, when trying to understand any passage of scripture we always need to look at the scriptural context to interpret this verse, specifically Jesus' comments about turning the other cheek, giving not only your shirt but also your coat to a creditor, and going the extra mile (Matthew 5:38-42).

*<sup>38</sup> "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. <sup>40</sup> If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. <sup>41</sup> If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.*

In each of these three scenarios it is not about being passive, but what is actually happening is that the initiative is being taken away from the aggressor, through an unexpected and challenging act.

I am told in the culture of Jesus day, you could only use the back of the right hand when striking out and insulting someone. Therefore, if you have already been struck on the right cheek, to turn the other cheek means the assailant can only hit you on the nose, which would be inappropriate for them. So this isn't a passive, 'you can do whatever you like to me' response, but it is also not any sort of retaliation or revenge.

In the same way in the case of the creditor, the poor person is being asked to give their shirt and then it is suggested to give their coat as well as a way of settling his debt. As no undies were worn in the day, this would make the person naked causing the creditor to be shamed for causing the nakedness of this poor person.

Finally, if a Roman soldier forced someone to carry their pack one mile, then going the extra mile would be in violation of military code placing the soldier at risk of military discipline.

This interpretation of this passage may be different from how you have read the passage. What this understanding suggests however, is rather than passive inaction - which risks a victim-like mentality - or a violent reaction - which can escalate a situation - there is counter-action which disempowers the aggressor.

It would seem that Jesus is saying; by all means, respond—even forcefully—but in a non-retaliatory, non-violent manner.

Pacifism then, might be better understood as 'aggressive but non-violent'. Killing is never an acceptable option. Can this work?

- Remember Jan's brilliant message on the Māori prophets Te Whiti and Tohu who employed non-violent tactics at Parihaka in Taranaki, when their village was surrounded by troops;
- Mahatma Gandhi toppled the British Empire;
- Martin Luther King demonstrated it in America over civil rights;
- and the Berlin Wall came down in Eastern Europe without armies going to war.

**Just war**

The just war theory, our second position, has strong support from many Christians. Historically it was developed by Augustine and Aquinas. In brief, it has seven conditions.

1. First, there must be a formal declaration made by a legitimate party. It must be noted that New Zealand did not join the 'coalition of the willing' against Iraq because the US, UK and others did not constitute a legitimate body. If, however, the United Nations had come out in support of the invasion, it may have changed its mind.
2. Second, war must be a genuine last resort: Everything else must have been tried to resolve the conflict.
3. Third, it must be a just cause... (A clear wrong)
4. with the right intention. In other words, revenge or greed does not justify a war.
5. Fifth, there must be proportionate means... Benefit must outweigh the harm
6. that can ensure non-combatant immunity.
7. Finally, there must be a reasonable expectation of success.

Just War theory proposes that war, while terrible, is not always the worst option. Many will argue that the Second World War was a just war.

If the challenge for the pacifist is to step-up and do something, even at great personal risk, then the challenge for those supporting the just war position is to genuinely try everything else before reverting to violence.

### **Pre-emption**

There is a third position - Pre-emption. It is a recent development largely because of huge developments in internet and computer technologies. Increasingly, nations can find out what another individuals, groups, or countries are about to do. In light of that advance knowledge, they can act before they are acted upon - to do unto others before it is done unto you. (As the youngest of three boys in my family, it seemed through my childhood that my brothers followed the pre-emptive position. Whereas when I applied that principle to my two younger sisters; not only did I get whacked by my brothers but my parents as well!!!)

The Iraq War was supposedly a case in point of a pre-emptive act with the 'US and UK' claiming their intelligence pointed to weapons of mass destruction. In

July 2016 a report condemned both the US and the UK for basing their invasion of Iraq on faulty, if not dishonest, intelligence.

**What about you?** Where do you sit?

- Are you a pacifist? And let me say, trying pacifism but going for a just war if pacifism doesn't work isn't really an option. By definition, pacifism is always non-violent and opposed to taking human life in all circumstances.
- Are you a 'just war' advocate
- or a supporter of pre-emption?

Admittedly, you can be both of the last two. On hearing what another is about to do, you can do everything possible to de-escalate the crisis.

Making this decision in a comfortable church with no imminent threat is somewhat artificial and academic. What would you be saying if you were part of the church in Egypt where in a recent bombing dozens of friends and family were killed and many more injured?

Who knows how we would act in an actual crisis. But we at least need to think our position through, so when the time comes we at least understand the issues.

### **A Christian response?**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor in the 1930s. After quiet and serious reflection, he came to the view that Adolf Hitler had to be removed from power, even if it was at the point of a gun. In fact, Bonhoeffer said he would be willing to pull the trigger himself, then ask God for forgiveness.

In his view Hitler was like an out of control truck, swerving this way and that, and maiming people that got in its way. What should the Christian response be? To run behind the truck bandaging the maimed and wounded on the sidewalk? Or to drive a spike through the truck wheels to stop it? Bonhoeffer, having prayed and given deep thought to the matter, determined the truck must be stopped.

What is your response? Are you a pacifist? Are you in favour of a just war? Where should Christians stand on this issue?

I have to admit that my personal stand tends to swing. I can easily argue that it is wrong for anyone to take the life of another human being: But then conflicts that mirror the evil rampage of Hitler have given me cause for pause.

Mick Duncan in his articles mentions John Goldingay who has presented what I would call a very balanced view. He makes the following points:

1. Human life is characterised by war and conflict.
2. War is not one thing. There are liberative wars, defensive wars, aggressive wars, and punitive wars.
3. War is a reality in which God sometimes takes part. God does not reject the use of force and violence.
4. War will have no place in the end. Eventually, God will terminate it.
5. It is important that some Christians are pacifists as a reminder to the church and to the world that God's creation is not meant to be at war with itself - war is unnatural.
6. Some of us must love our enemies by lying in front of their tanks. Others must love the oppressed by taking the tanks in order to put down wrong.

In principle I am a pacifist and I would like to think that I have the courage of my convictions to lie in front of the tanks. In reality – I don't know.

Given current realities, I believe the World regrettably needs those courageous enough to take to the tanks in the name of the oppressed.

Lord give us wisdom – let's pray

God of wholeness, God of Grace,  
 to you we bring our thanks and praise.  
 To a world that searches  
 you are a lamp that shines,  
 to a world that is hungry  
 you are food that sustains,  
 to a world that suffers  
 you are hope of release,  
 to a world that's broken  
 you are one who restores,  
 to a world full of hate  
 you are love that forgives,  
 to a world that denies  
 you are truth that endures.  
 To you we bring our thanks and praise,  
 God of wholeness, God of Grace.

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