**War and Peace**

It's perfectly clear, isn't it? God loves good and hates evil. We see throughout the Hebrew scripture, or what Christians refer to as the Old Testament, God blessing or cursing the Jews depending on how well they maintained their covenant with God. We see God smite evil tribes and nations and we see God reward God-fearing ones. Of course, we tend to forget that it was God who dispensed the justice. We also forget that God offered evil nations his mercy should they repent. We especially forget that God established a new covenant through Jesus based on grace and forgiveness, even for one's enemies. It appears that many Christians today feel it is our job, not God's, to decide who is good and evil and our job to provide justice. We fail to take our cues from Jesus, the focus of our faith and worship. We fail to grasp that Jesus teaches restorative justice and not retributive justice.

Jesus clearly promoted peace and nonviolence. He taught us to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44) The Apostle Paul teaches us likewise saying:

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not overcome evil by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17-21)

Does this sound even remotely like what we see in today's world? Paul makes it clear in this passage that it is God's job to provide justice, not ours. Jesus made it clear that He does not want us to act as judge and jury saying, "How can you say to your brother let me take the speck out of your eye when all the time there is a plank in your own eye." (Matthew 7:4). You might say, "That's easy for him to say, Jesus wasn't living in today's world." You're right, his world was worse. In the 1000 years leading up to his birth and death, Israel was serially raped and pillaged by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, and Romans. Of course, this still does not answer the question as to what should be done about dictators like Saddam Hussein who tortured and/or murdered at least hundreds of thousands of his own citizens. What do we do when an ethnic or religious faction embarks on a mission of genocide against another such as in Kosova, Rwanda, or Sudan? How do we respond to acts of terrorism such as the attack on the World Trade Center in New York or the horrific terror of ISIS or Hamas?

Any discussion about war from the Christian perspective must begin with an assertion that God's love doesn't recognize national barriers. We must eliminate the "us versus them" mentality, the concept that God is on our side. People say, "God bless America" with an arrogance that implies that God blesses the United States of America and no other. We ignore the words God spoke to Abraham, “Through you I will bless **all** **nations**.” God loves everyone throughout the world equally. God finds them all precious, even people without any apparent redeeming qualities. During war, we keep score of our casualties and their casualties, mourning our own. God only sees sacrificed beloved children and weeps for all. The difference between God and us is that God is able to distinguish between evil acts and evil people. To categorize one group of people as evil and another as good is inconsistent with Christian theology. The apostle Paul makes it clear in his letter to the Romans, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23). There is not one of us that lives our life in the way in which God would have us do so. As Christians, we confess that we are all justified with God only through God’s grace, not by our actions.

We must also remember that the basic tenants of Christianity preclude violence as a solution to conflict, except as a last resort. St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas were just two of the Christian church's great theologians who recognized this. They defined a set of moral and legal rules for what would constitute a "just war". Just War theory sets the following as criteria:

· Just Cause: Force may be used only in the most egregious of circumstances or for self-defense.

· Comparative Justice: The injustice suffered by one party in a conflict must grossly outweigh that suffered by the other.

· Legitimate Authority: Only duly recognized authorities may wage war.

· Right Intention: Force may be used only to correct the injustice, not for material gain.

· Probability of Success: War must not be waged when excessive measures will be required to achieve success or when use of force will be futile.

· Proportionality: The expected destruction from the use of force must be outweighed by the good achieved. In addition, only the amount of force necessary to end the evil is employed.

· Last Resort: Force must be used only when all peaceful alternatives have been exhausted.

In many ways Just War theory developed as a compromise between European countries and the Christian church. The church could not condone every war but would lose its popularity if it opposed all wars. Just War theory provided the church with the option of supporting some wars in exchange for maintaining church attendance and being able to spread Christianity into subjugated territories.

A "just war" seems possible in theory, especially when combatants are cooperative enough to fight each other on the battlefield, away from innocents. But it is difficult to apply in today's real world. Who is to decide when an offense is grave enough to warrant force? Who is to decide when all peaceful and viable alternatives have been exhausted prior to the use of force? Ideally, it would be an international body such as the United Nations, but this has not been the case. In addition, proportionality is difficult to achieve. In modern war, military targets are often placed within civilian centers. Civilian casualties then become inevitable. Who is to decide how many civilian casualties are acceptable for any given military gain? During World War II, the allies totally devastated the city of Dresden Germany, a city with no military targets. In Vietnam, innocent women and children were killed because no one knew whether they were armed. In the Iraq war, civilian neighborhoods were bombed, killing innocent people, on the presumption that there was a military target nearby. Clearly, the hypothesis of a "just war" is flawed.

Part of conflict resolution must include an assessment of our role in the problem, perhaps the "plank in our own eye" that Jesus mentioned. Wealthy countries play the "rich man" to the world's "Lazarus", throwing them scraps, hoping they will be content. (See Luke 16:19-31) We need to replace arrogance with humility, self-righteous leadership with servant leadership. As world peacemakers, we must elevate the countries that are impoverished and vulnerable. If we had spent millions of dollars building the infrastructure of Afghanistan, providing basic needs such as roads, schools, and housing, the Taliban and would never have assumed control of that country. We would have saved billions of dollars spent on war and reconstruction later. We must ask ourselves, "Why is it so hard for wealthy countries to be generous? Why does our defense budget dwarf our foreign aid budget?" It is up to Christians to promote an intentional agenda of compassion towards impoverished countries. Bishop Tutu describes the world as a "brotherhood of mankind". He states that God wants us to treat each other not just as equals, but as brothers. Jesus told his disciples that he wanted them to love one another as Jesus loved them. He instructed his disciples to take God's message of unconditional love and forgiveness to "the ends of the earth". As God's modern disciples, for the most part, we have failed. We must vow to do better; the survival of humanity depends upon it.

While there are no broad sweeping conclusions to be made on how to resolve international conflict, certain principles should always apply. Our response to any given situation should be based upon reason and compassion, not fear. Our response should be dictated with a respect towards tolerance and the sacredness of human life, not by violence. We should seek healing and forgiveness, not revenge and retaliation. Overwhelming international consensus and international law should guide action. Preemptive military action should not be undertaken unilaterally. Israel's preemptive strikes on the leaders of Hamas only served to energize their base of support, ultimately propelling Hamas to the forefront in Palestinian elections in Gaza. The United States preemptive war in Iraq may have eliminated a heinous dictator, but it also inflamed fundamentalist Muslims thereby increasing the potential pool of Islamic terrorists.

Does this mean that the perpetrators of terror should go unpunished? No, there must be accountability for actions. But justice is not achieved through far-reaching, massive strokes of retaliation that squanders innocent life and ignites passions of anger and violence. Among other places, we have seen this revenge and retaliation in Ireland, Palestine, Rwanda, Kashmir, the Balkans, and Iraq. It just doesn't work. Violence always begets more violence. Generally, it is best that work be done behind the scenes, with international cooperation, to destroy the internal structure and capability of the networks used by terrorists and dictators, rather than through declaration of war. It is recognized that there are horrific actions such as the unmitigated perpetration of mass genocide that dictates decisive, forceful intervention. In this case, compassion dictates prompt intervention. International organizations such as the United Nations must improve their ability to respond to such a crisis decisively.

A gentler and more compassionate approach to terrorism can be seen in the efforts of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa where 1500 troops built 52 schools, 23 medical facilities, and 25 water wells. The Horn of Africa includes the easternmost countries of Africa across the Red Sea from the Arabian Peninsula. These countries are home to 90 million Muslims, many of whom are impoverished. It is here that Al Qaeda bombed the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Major General Timothy Gormley, the task force commander, explained their work, "We are in a generational fight for the hearts and minds. We do water projects and build schools that help a poor child in a village, and in 20 years that child will remember us." Shashank Bengali of the Philadelphia Inquirer writes:

A few days after Christmas, US Army Sergeant First Class Adam Reed road into the parched, hungry village of Sankabar with a new present: a new water pump. This month, Reed returned to the village, where elders gleefully showed the soldier from Sidon, Mississippi what the simple irrigation system had brought: budding green fields of corn, bananas and oranges, the most promising crops in years. "We are coming out of drought because of the pump," Omar Ahmed, a Sankabar elder, said. "So we say thank you, America. And thank you, Mr. Reed. He is the first guy to give us help."6

Humanitarian need such as this stabilizes a region that otherwise would be a breeding ground for terrorists. Providing this type of compassionate assistance certainly is more within the spirit of our faith and should be modeled elsewhere.

Humankind will often act from a center of greed and selfishness. As people who are "transformed in Christ", Christians choose to live with a perspective directed toward being part of a larger community, the "body of Christ", which knows no geographical boundaries. We strive to live in solidarity with all people. The Christian chooses to live in connectedness with people of all nations because he sees all people as inherently worthy creations of God. Overwhelmed by a sense of abundance and filled with grace, Christians choose a life that is tolerant of, and generous to, others who are different. The authentic Christian has no place for a "we are good and they are bad" mentality. Perhaps when we realize this, we can truly become the disciples that Jesus spoke of in His Sermon on the Mount when He said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.”

6 Shashank Bengali, Philadelphia Inquirer, January 30, 2006