

Remembrance Sunday

Readings: Isaiah Chapter 2, Verses 1-4; Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 1-12

Remembrance Sunday is not just a time when we think of those who died in two World Wars but also those who died in the many conflicts since then. It is right that we should remember. But, for Christians, Remembrance Sunday also raises the question of whether war can ever be justified.

Way back in the 4th century it was St Augustine who gave an answer which for 100s of years was accepted by Christians. He formulated the doctrine of the *Just War* and argued that, under certain circumstances taking up arms was a legitimate response to aggression. But the nature of modern warfare has rendered Augustine's doctrine irrelevant. So we are back to square one again.

On the one hand the teaching of Jesus suggests that a non-violent response is the only option for Christians. Jesus advocated non-violence and He put his money where his mouth was. When they arrested him in the Garden of Gethsemane and Peter drew his sword Jesus rebuked him. It seems that the issue is clear-cut. Violent retaliation is ruled out.

Yet it has often been argued that Jesus' teaching related to personal relationships and is not automatically applicable to national and international relationships. Its one thing to turn the other cheek when confronted one-to-one in a conflict situation. But would it have been the Christian thing to do nothing when Britain stood confronted by the evil of Nazi-ism? And should we simply stand aside when the Islamic League decapitates prisoners and throws 'gays' off the top of three-storey buildings and wage a Holy War today? That's the dilemma.

My conscience has been sorely troubled by this and I can only share with you the conclusions I have come to.

My starting point is the realisation that the kind of world we live in does not give us the luxury of a straight choice between Good and Evil — if it did I would not have a problem. More often than not the choices open to me are between two evils. It's a case of being caught up in a situation where we are damned if we do and damned if we don't.

And so I am forced to choose what I regard as the lesser of two evils. War comes into this category. There is no way in which taking up arms and engaging in war can ever be regarded as a Good. War is always an evil. But, not to fight, may result in an even greater evil triumphing.

So I find myself having to make a distinction. On the one hand Good and Evil. On the other hand Right and Wrong. And it may well be that the Right thing to do may not be the Good thing to do. Declaring war against the evil of Nazi-ism may have been the Right thing to do. I would never pretend that, in an ultimately moral sense, it was the Good thing to do.

If we are faced with having to choose the lesser of two evils then one thing is for sure. Whatever the outcome the proper response is not engage in triumphalism. Rather it is to get down on our knees and ask God for mercy.

I can never forget a passage in Nicholas Monsaratt's book "The Cruel Sea". It recounts an incident during the 2nd World War. A navy destroyer was escorting a convoy of ships carrying supplies to Russia when the convoy was attacked by a pack of German submarines. A number of merchant ships were sunk and the icy waters were filled with drowning sailors. The destroyer headed to rescue the stranded men but, as it did so, its sonar picked up the echo of a submarine in the same area. The captain faced an appalling dilemma. Stop and pick up the drowning men or drop depth charges and blow the sub out of the water. The captain agonised over his decision and then gave the order: "Drop depth charges". The resultant explosion not only blew the sub out of the water; it did the same for many of his own countrymen. The captain's response was simply to say; "Lord, have mercy".

That is the Christian response. It is not easy or popular. Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister was enraged when she called for a service of Thanksgiving after the Falklands conflict and the Archbishop insisted on a prayer of Confession and a prayer for the Argentinian soldiers killed as well. The Archbishop was right. We had participated in an evil and to ask forgiveness was the proper thing to do.

There is one other dimension which we ought to take on board. It is that true peace is the outcome of worship.

Isaiah envisaged the nations streaming to the House of God in order to learn His ways and walk in His paths. The result? "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruning hooks and study war no more."

On the night when Christ was born the shepherds heard a heavenly choir sing the anthem:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace"

To worship rightly is to love each other and we do not love each other by dropping cluster bombs and firing off guided missiles with nuclear warheads. So let us go from our worship and live and work and pray for the day when:

Men will beat their swords into ploughshares;
Their spears into pruning hooks;
Their ballistic missiles into appropriate technology;
And study war no more