

## Is there such a thing as a *just* war

### The heart of the matter

All Christian churches accept the authority of the Holy Scriptures of the Christian Church, and within that scriptural authority a special focus is assigned to the ministry - the life, the death and the resurrection - of Jesus of Nazareth.

Central to the story of Jesus of Nazareth is the Sermon on the Mount. Christians can't have Jesus apart from this text. And it is not simply a text from the historical Jesus, but it has gone through the hermeneutical cleansing fire of the resurrection. In other words, it has been intentionally accepted as belonging to the content of faith of the Christian community in which the Gospel of Matthew evolved; and then later with the Gospel of Matthew it has become part of the Christian canon of Holy Scriptures.

The Sermon on the Mount holds together *the indicative and the imperative* of Christian faith.

The *indicative* is expressed in the so-called beatitudes. Among them are these:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ...

You are the salt of the earth ...  
You are the light of the world.  
A city built on a hill cannot be hid.  
No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,  
but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to all in the house.  
In the same way, let your light shine before others,  
so that they may see your good works  
and give glory to your Father in heaven."  
(Matthew 5:1-16)

The indicative, naming who the people are, who hear, believe and obey the story of Jesus, issues into imperatives that spell out how those people should live. Such imperatives make up the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Among them are the following:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'  
But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.  
But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek,  
turn the other also; ..." (Matthew 5:38-42)

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.  
But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? ... And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'" (Matthew 5:43-48)

The reality from which these words come and to which these words point should be the stuff from which the Christian attitude to war is distilled.

It is worth noting that these words do not endorse a passive or disinterested attitude to life. Just as peace is more than the absence of war, so a commitment to non-violence does not mean being

passive or withdrawing from responsibility for life. Jesus rejected the Zealot option of using violence in the struggle for justice, and Jesus also discarded the Essene option of withdrawing from the market place of life. Indeed, it was Jesus' active involvement in the affairs of his society that caused opposition and finally his execution.

### **Clash with reality**

Jesus' challenge to be "peacemakers", to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" by entrusting their lives to the God who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous", and to manifest that trust by "loving the enemy" and "not resisting the evildoer", clashes with experienced reality - then and now.

Jesus intentionally rejected the Zealot option. For Jesus, the word "God" implied non-violence. While the Zealots were prepared to use violence in their struggle to let God be God and to have no other Gods besides God (Exod. 20:2f.), Jesus' devotion to the God of the Decalogue entailed a commitment to refuse the use of violence.

This clash with reality was felt then and it has been felt by Christians through the ages. Given a world in which violence is rampant, how can Christians live by Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount? As we know, Jesus of Nazareth was opposed, captured, sentenced and executed after only a brief time of public ministry. There were many reasons for that opposition, but his active peace witness must be seen as part of it. Christians cannot ignore the Sermon on the Mount if they do not want to question the ground and content of their faith. Such clash with reality has been felt by the peace movement and the peace churches through the ages, and it continues to be felt by Christian discipleship groups today.

This clash with reality is also felt in other areas. There is the hermeneutical challenge of how the ground and content of Christian faith, which is intrinsically linked to the Jesus Story, should be related to the world then and now. There is the moral challenge of how Christians should relate to a secular state in a traditional Christian culture. Can Christians who confess God as creator of heaven and earth - "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Psalm 24:1) - withdraw from responsibility for the common good? In which sense are politicians, yes, leaders of state, who confess to be Christian, bound to what is supposed to be the ground and content of their lives? And then there is the challenge of what we mean when we say "war". There is no comparison between war and its consequences in the first century, or even the first and second world wars, and the devastating potential of nuclear and biological warfare today.

The greatest challenge for Christians is when the imperative of the Sermon on the Mount collides with the need for self-defence and the need to protect the dignity of others. Is there an alternative to war when hostile forces attack your country? Can you stand by when minorities are tortured, oppressed and eliminated?

Keeping these challenges in mind, we shall now ask how the Christian churches have dealt with the clash between Jesus' peace witness and the experienced reality of human life. How, on the one hand, have the Christian churches handled their confession of Christ as the incarnation of peace, and, on the other, their responsibility in and to the world?

### **Christian attitudes to war**

Christians have neither spoken nor acted in a unified manner on the topic of war. A number of trajectories, each with their own historical origins and theological validation, can be discerned in the Christian church.

Non-violence. Up to the 4th century, more exactly, up to the time of the formation of the corpus christianum, that great marriage between church and state when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church was committed to non-violence.

A word from the 2nd century Christian theologian and apologist Justin Martyr summarises the Christian ethos in the second and third centuries:

"... we who were filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness, have each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons - our swords into ploughshares and our spears into implements of tillage - and we cultivate piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith and hope, which we have from the Father Himself through Him who was crucified."

And again:

"... we who once killed each other not only do not make war on each other, but in order not to lie or deceive our inquisitors we gladly die for the confession of Christ."

This tradition, centred on non-violence and the preparedness to suffer for that commitment, was kept alive during the Middle Ages and the Reformation by people like Francis of Assisi, Wycliffe and Erasmus, and by dissident groups such as the Cathari, the Waldensians, and factions within the Hussite and the Anabaptist movements. To the present day it has been fuelled by the traditional Peace churches (Mennonites, Quakers, Brethren) and by para church groups in all Christian denominations. With the rise of the nuclear and biological weapons, this movement has grown and has gained considerable popularity also in the political arena, especially in Europe, where the nuclear threat is deeply felt. The World Council of Churches has named the present decade as the "Decade to overcome Violence".

The theological validation for those who believe that waging peace is a central part of Christian faith is centred in Jesus' non-violent vision of reality. On a deeper level, the resurrection of Jesus can be interpreted in terms of an ontology of non-violence and peace. By raising the victim of violence from death, God, for Christians, affirms and establishes a non-violent vision of reality. Allow me again to emphasise that non-violence is not to be confused with passiveness or disinterest. Peace, like war, needs to be waged!

The problem of this position is that many Christians cannot yet conceive of a world without war. They therefore privatise the peace witness of Christ and refuse to acknowledge its relevance for the political arena. On the other hand, there is a growing number of Christians who want to affirm the relevance of Christ for all areas of life, and given modern military technology, they insist that if we want to assure the humane survival of the human race, other ways than war must be found to solve human conflicts. Such thinkers find encouragement in the fact that in centuries past it was also thought unlikely that humanity could abolish slavery or patriarchy, both of which at least in theory have been abolished and outlawed by universal human rights.

"Just War". Secondly, there is the so-called "just war" tradition. This would be the position of most major denominations and perhaps most Christians. Here war is considered to be an emergency measure. It should not really happen, but given the selfishness, arrogance, injustice and greed of humans, Christians have felt forced to argue that wars can be just if they were carried out for noble reasons, such as self-defence or the vindication of justice or the restoration of peace.

It is important for Christians to acknowledge and theologically digest the fact that a military victory was decisive in establishing the Christian church as a powerful movement in history and society. There are those who argue that the military victory of Constantine on the Milvian bridge in Rome at the beginning of the 4th century shaped the Christian ethos more than the foundational story of Jesus. In consequence of that victory and the subsequent 20 years of civil war, the Christian church emerged as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Thereby Christianity's relationship to the state was shaped and with it war was now on the official agenda of the Christian church.

The *corpus christianum*, that fateful marriage between state and church, which in theory lasted to the Reformation in the 16th century, but in practice is still alive in countries where one Christian church is dominant, implied a political role for the established church. With regard to war, Christian

theologians adopted and modified the "just war" thinking of Greek and Roman Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, and thereby sought to relate Christian faith with the worldly reality of war. With the "just war" theory Christians did not intend to deny the Jesus story; they thought that in a fallen world the radical demands of Jesus Christ are unworkable, that evil needs to be restrained, that one's country had to be protected against invasions, and that compromises needed to be made. Criteria were developed with the intention that necessary compromises did not result in moral relativism or political expediency. Such criteria for a "just war" included:

That a war would be declared and fought by a proper legal authority.

A war could only be just if all other means of solving the conflict have been exhausted.

A war must have a just cause. Guilt must be located only on one side and it must be established beyond doubt.

War must be engaged in for the right motivation. Not revenge or conquest, but defence against aggressors, the restoration of peace, and the punishment of the offender can be seen as such.

To engage in war, one must be convinced that the situation after the war will be better than before.

Innocent civilians must not be endangered.

Meditating on these criteria, it would be difficult to justify any war. Just think of the protection of innocent civilians! And life has become so complicated that a just cause and right intention would be very difficult to prove. If one adds modern nuclear and biological possibilities, then no war would leave the world in a better shape that it was before.

The theological validation for the "just war" position is a little more complicated than the non-violent option, since it has to find a way around the clear peace witness of the Sermon on the Mount. Briefly, the following arguments are advanced.

The force of the Sermon on the Mount is weakened by saying:

that Jesus' ethical imperatives apply only to the private sphere; that public life cannot be determined by the Sermon on the Mount;

that Jesus' ethical imperatives are no longer relevant because the early Christians wrongly expected the imminent return of Jesus.

that Jesus' words apply only to the church or, even narrower, only to the clergy;

that Jesus' exhortations are unattainable ideals and, as such, only serve to show up our failure to meet God's expectations and, by implication, drive believers to repentance and faith.

These objections are understandable, given the radical expectations of Jesus, but they are not convincing. If the central role of Jesus for Christian faith is affirmed, then the radical demands of the Sermon on the Mount cannot be easily dismissed or explained away.

Others argue that the words of Jesus and their interpretation in the Gospel of Matthew must be relativised by other texts in the Christian Bible. They point, for instance, to Romans 13 where the apostle Paul intimates that the state under God "bears the sword" to execute God's "wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4). But with regard to Romans 13 we must note:

that the immediate context emphasises to "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, .... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:14-21) These immediately preceding words are underscored by what immediately follows: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; .... Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8-10)

and then we must not overlook the fact that in Revelation 13 the same Roman state is named the "beast" who utters "blasphemies against God"; and Acts 5:29 contains the salient reminder that "we must obey God rather than any human authority."

Christians gladly recognise the important function of the state under God, but at the same time they maintain that the state belongs to the pen-ultimate. It must be reminded that it cannot claim ultimate loyalty from its citizens, and it must allow itself to be evaluated in light of the revealed purposes of God.

The overwhelming ethos sketched by the Writings of the Holy Scriptures of the Christian Church is that faith in Christ contains non-violence as an essential element; more so, it echoes the being of God by showing compassion for one's enemies and in a world estranged from God, it has to reckon with suffering.

There are one or two texts that suggest a different vision, but they cannot detract from the above affirmation.

The 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" (Mt10:34, par. Lk 12:51 "division"), refers to the "division" (so the parallel text in Luke) that the new vision of God's ways brings into one's personal networks (Mt 10:34-36, par. Lk 12:51-53) and which are to be expected as part of letting the story of Jesus determine one's life (Mt 10:37-39).

More often, the so-called Temple cleansing is mentioned (Mk 11:15-17, Mt 21:12f., Lk 19:45f., Jn 2:14-17) as a possible illustration that Jesus resorted to violence. The imagery of Jesus "making a whip of cords" (only in John), turning over tables and driving the money changers out is seen to point in that direction. But those who are familiar with prophetic symbolism, and realising that the text refers to two major prophets who used such symbolism, makes it much more likely that Jesus used prophetic symbolism, what we may call a demonstration or street drama, to make the point that in his view the temple cult was seeking God in the wrong direction.

The Jewish Scriptures, which are also part of the Christian canon, are a hermeneutical challenge for Christians. In them they read texts that picture God as the bringer of peace alongside texts that counsel war as part of God's working in the world. Christians should show respect for such texts in the Hebrew Bible, but at the same time they will read them critically from a Christological perspective.

The "just war" position would be the most popular position within Christianity. Especially when it comes to self-defence and the struggle for justice, it leaves the door open for Christians to counsel and participate in war. But war could only be a last resort, and if the ethical criteria are taken seriously then it would be hard to imagine that in our time war can be called "just". There are an increasing number of voices that call for a transformation of the "just war" to a "just peace" tradition.

Crusade. Then, thirdly, in the history of Christianity there has been the crusade idea which developed during the Middle Ages. It was fuelled by the conviction that the Christian religion is the only true religion and that this truth must be spread to all corners of the earth. Trade and politics were utilised as tools to spread the Christian message, and biblical texts, especially from the Jewish Scriptures, were used to justify war and validate the persecution and destruction of so-called infidels and heretics.

Most Christian thinkers would reject this option today, but there are critics inside and outside of Christianity who say that among some fundamentalist and/or nominal Christians a crusading attitude is still very much alive.

We saw that all three attitudes - non-violence, "just war" and the crusade - were and are justified by referring to the Holy Scriptures of the Christian Church. The non-violent option points to Jesus' and early Christian non-violence. The "just war" theory draws on sections of the Hebrew Bible and on texts like Romans 13, which seem to endorse the activities of government. And the crusade option calls on the Hebrew Bible and the call to mission in the New Testament.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

From what I have said, it is obvious that there is no agreed Christian position on war. Some concluding observations may indicate the direction in which intentional Christians and their communities are moving.

1. The Christian faith since its beginning has always sought a way between withdrawal from responsibility for the world on the one hand, and conformity or accommodation to the ways of the world on the other. Concern for justice and peace has been part of Christian faith from its beginning.
2. Bringing the content of faith in Jesus Christ together with the reality of war has led to different answers in the churches. Today, given the potential destructive force of modern war, the majority of Christian thinkers and Christian churches lean towards the position of non-violence with the possibility of war being seen as a last resort. But even then it is acknowledged that the so-called just war criteria cannot be met.
3. Given the role that religions in general and Christianity in particular have played in justifying and intensifying militarism, many Christian thinkers today counsel that we cannot expect peace in the world until there is peace within and among religions. Religious people of all persuasions need to ask themselves what attitude they should adopt towards a global waging of peace.
4. The foundational event of the Christian religion is not a law that defines what Christians must or must not do. It is an act of God in which God raised Jesus from the dead and by the ministry of God's Spirit spoke faith into the lives of believers and their communities. That faith and its social dimension, the church, includes as a necessary ingredient the message of the Sermon of the Mount with its clear call to non-violence, its commitment to unconditional love, and the willingness to suffer.
5. I have serious doubts whether Christians today can call a war "just". My hope would be that more people tell and hear the stories of how humanity has moved beyond slavery and patriarchy, and therefore can also seek and find other ways of solving human conflict than by the institution of war.

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