



27 April 2014  
The First Sunday after Easter  
Choral Evensong  
2 Samuel 18 vv. 9–15, v. 24– 19 v. 8  
Luke 9 vv. 51–56

**The Pity of War**  
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O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son. (2 Samuel 18 v. 33)

*May I speak in the name and to the glory of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, our Lord*

There are reasons soldiers do not engage in detailed and accurate descriptions of the field of battle.

There are also reasons why people who take the New Testament and the teaching of Jesus seriously are frequently pacifists, and indeed this coming Tuesday evening the distinguished New Testament scholar, Professor Richard Hays will be speaking in Cambridge on exactly that: 'Why I am a Pacifist'.

Throughout this coming term during which we shall mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Normandy landings, and in the year of the commemoration of the beginning of the First World War - during which between 9 and 15 million people were killed - we will be exploring ideas of war and peace: how we remember war, what we remember, the consequences of war, the Christian alternatives of the 'Just War theory' – still remarkably influential in our more secular world - and pacifism. Whatever conclusions people come to on this latter issue, and here I give you a hostage to fortune, it will be a significant challenge for any preacher to use the New Testament in clear support of war, even a just war. For at some level all violence is a betrayal of Christian commitment - as Jesus makes clear in dismissing the 'punitive psychology' of his own disciples in our New Testament reading who, in the face of rejection, seek vengeful recompense.

But that debate is not my focus this evening.

As T.S. Eliot famously put it in his Four Quartets, 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality'. This is most especially true when we turn to war and the horrors of war.

The word our Anglo-Saxon forebears used for humanity was 'speechbearers' and it is interesting to reflect on that relationship; that relationship between language and its use, and humanity – in the context of warfare. For here it seems we prefer our reality very heavily muffled, camouflaged, masked, sanitised and wrapped. So we have: 'Collateral damage', we 'search and clear', we 'de-conflict airspace', we engage kinetically, we may also exercise 'extreme prejudice' or strike 'surgically'. More routinely, we always, only, use 'force', and we do so simply, to 'get the job done'. In drawing our attention to such language I am simply seeking to point out that there is a powerful imperative towards technical and euphemistic expression rather than more realistic and immediately comprehensible accounts of what is 'really going on' for the human beings involved, or caught up, in conflict zones.

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What is ‘really going on’ is of course difficult to document, and the impact of statistics, which are, inevitably frequently disputed, tells us little of reality and does not usually sit with us very long. I could tell you that since 2000 over 200, 000 people in the Sudan, over 170,000 in Iraq or over 100,000 people in Syria have been killed as a result of conflict; I could mention that estimates of those who have been killed as a consequence of war in the lifetime of some of you present, that is since World War II, probably stand at between 40 and 50 million, and you can contemplate the ‘margin of error’ in that statement. I could sharpen the matter and talk of civilian deaths, and tell you that the Iraq conflict to which this country signed up has resulted in the deaths of ‘something like’ 116,000 Iraqi civilians and 179 British troops, or repeat a statistic used by Desmond Tutu, that: "Some two million children have died in dozens of wars during the past decade...more than three times the number of battlefield deaths of American soldiers in all their wars since 1776."<sup>1</sup>

In addition then to the language that obscures and evades and anaesthetizes and helps us pass over such large numbers, we also bear our speech in two other related repertoires. The first includes words like sacrifice and honour and loyalty and glory, all evoked to support or protect the values of the nation, of democracy, of our way of life, even of Christian civilization. The second repertoire, more rhetorical and more blatantly propagandist talks of how wicked and utterly ‘other’ the enemy is and of how great a threat is posed. And it is worth pointing out that the first properly modern propaganda campaign was conducted by the British in World War I aimed at convincing American opinion-formers and intellectuals of the rightness of our cause against the Kaiser; an enterprise that ultimately spawned the PR industry. Such language games are of course essential to what has been described as the ‘engineering of consent’ within populations, especially necessary if democratic populations are to be cajoled or persuaded that a particular war is unavoidable.

But all of this involves an attack on the pity of war, on the natural human response of tenderness, of mercy; on the familial scale of human existence, that we are all beloved, all children born of a mother; involves a truncation of the time and space for compassionate reflection on death, on the horror and the waste and the pain and the sorrow.

O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son.

The cry from the heart of the father is echoed, and echoes continually – Loud and clear, heartfelt anguish that any parent could identify with, anguish at the death of a professional soldier in Afghanistan; at the death of an eighteen year old British Muslim boy who against his father’s advice joins the fight against Assad in Syria; at the death of a child, of a whole family, an old woman – all ‘collateral damage’, regrettable, unfortunate; at the shame-induced suicide of the woman raped by soldiers. Deep, wailing anguish that reverberates in the human heart, ‘my son..my daughter..my wife..my brother’, a railing against a world that has been so grievously torn and ripped apart. And yet this raw human experience is given so little space to nurture faithful remembrance or compassion or mercy.

We can see some of the reasons why in the pained tale of David and Absalom. ‘My Son, my son’, a powerful expression of a father’s grief, and in its own way, authentic, true, yet...pity is a swift casualty of circumstance. For Absalom, whilst son, is also a rival, David’s mortal enemy, the rebel son who has sought to overthrow his reign.

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu in 1996, see <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/28/026.html>. However there is little evidence that the situation has changed since then.



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And as Joab, David's trusty commander and perhaps the closest the OT gets to a professional soldier, seeks to remind him, his primary duty must be political, his allegiance to his people, to those who love him, not to those who have sought to do him and supporters harm. He is a king as well as a father, and must act like one. He must 'man up', put on a front and rejoice with his people that the civil war is over. He must swallow personal grief in the name of political leadership.

But pity is not simply a casualty of political necessity, we cannot let David walk away simply from the story as the tragic hero. For it is quite likely that David himself has engaged in what the CIA described back in the 1960s as 'plausible deniability': the blame-shifting, willed ignorance of unspoken understanding between people 'in the know'. For in this case he instructed Joab, before the commander set off to battle, to 'deal gently for my sake with the young man, Absalom' (2 Samuel 18 :5). 'Deal gently' What exactly does David mean? What does he intend? What does Joab understand him to mean? What could Joab quite reasonably understand him to mean given their shared history? It is far from clear whether the execution, the 'extreme prejudice' exercised, the darts loosed from Joab's arm piercing, splintering the torso is a 'gentle dealing for my sake' or not. David does not make enquirer; Joab does not have to elaborate. But surely the rebel, rival son cannot really be allowed to live.

O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son.

Pity, tenderness, mercy: the constant casualties of human calculations. And in David's words - 'would God I had died for thee' - do we also hear an undertone of guilt, of the man who had done nothing when Absalom's sister, Tamar had been raped by another of David's sons; hear the regret of a man who knows his inaction has fuelled the situation? Hear also the remorse of a King who ensured that his faithful soldier Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, was deliberately killed in battle?

The Old Testament conveys its message through the narrative itself, and the story makes clear that at the heart of it all lies the misuse of power – personal and political. As the words of the prophet Nathan who exposes David's sin with Bathsheba makes clear 'the sword shall never depart from your house'. (2 Samuel 12:10)

The 'natural' pity of the father for his son, the general human inclination to pity, – cut short, obscured and corrupted by the histories of personal betrayal, by the festering of injustice amongst the political and ethnic identities of peoples and their leaders, by the vicious cycle of bitter and deepening hatred and the desire for revenge.

As Christians we need to reflect on the speech we bear when we speak and seek to tell the truth about war; what we choose to bring into focus; what we think of as war's reality, its real-ness. As followers in the Way of the Incarnate God, bloodied and pierced, we need to understand not just of the geo-political and the historical, but also to bear witness to the flesh and blood, to the reality that all are children of earthly parents, nurtured and beloved; to give voice to that which, and those who, are rendered mute, to engage in stripping back to the painful, to the raw below, to give pity and tenderness her full voice....'O Absalom, my son, my son.'