



8 June 2014
Pentecost
Choral Evensong
Joshua 5 vv. 13–15
Luke 3 vv. 7–18

War and Peace: a Christian soldier's perspective?

By Major General Timothy Cross CBE
Retired British Army

I have been asked to give a Christian soldiers perspective on the issue of War and Peace - on conflict in an uncertain world. I have been given 15 minutes to do so – so inevitably I can only brush the surface. My aim therefore is to set out a little of my journey with some thoughts on this issue, and perhaps leave you with a challenge.

I joined the Army as a cadet in 1964 and was eventually commissioned in 1971 when I was 20. Like most of my contemporaries I found myself in N. Ireland in the 1970's in the middle of two sides of a long-standing conflict, experiencing the reality behind the headlines – the gangsters, the protection rackets, the greed and desire for power. Later deployments took me to divided Cyprus with the UN, the Balkans 3 times and the Middle East twice – in 1991 and 2003, when I worked in Washington, Kuwait and then Baghdad. And in between it all, on Easter Sunday in 1981 - my 30th Birthday - I became a Christian whilst visiting the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem – which defined the years since. Throughout those years I experienced the religious, ethnic and cultural bigotry that divides our world and the brutality that flows from it – when you have watched the mass graves being dug up words like 'sin' and 'evil' are not interesting theological issues – they are a stark reality of a brutal world.

War is the province of uncertainty. Operations are, by their very nature, physically and mentally demanding, extremely unpredictable and potentially dangerous - characterised by uncertainty, fear, fatigue, and discomfort, all of which have to be faced and overcome by individual human beings. And – quite rightly - there is Moral, Ethical and Legal accountability. But the distinction between the law, morality, ethics and military realities quickly blurs. In this new age of universal human rights how exactly do you deal with people prepared to use any means to achieve their ends; suicide bombings, ethnic massacres, indiscriminate terrorism and the bloody combat that flows from it all; how do you establish justice and deal with sin and evil?

The stark reality for military – and indeed political - leaders today is that they operate within a mass of Laws, Conventions and Protocols, and the accompanying collection of Human Rights, Charters and Rules of Engagements - all subjected to deep scrutiny, increasingly by lawyers and always by the media. But we cannot legislate for morality, particularly as this all lies within a paradox – which is that the principal role of an Army, the reason it exists, is to deliver what we call Fighting Power, not to be nice. There are no prizes for coming second on a battlefield. The test is war and battle; the result triumph or defeat.

But split-second decisions and actions may be seen retrospectively by courts – civil or military, domestic or international, or by wider opinion, as unjust or criminal. And the end result is that whilst some, like the British Government, argue that the military are a “Force for Good” in the world, others disagree. A Canadian Parachute battalion had to be disbanded in disgrace when its soldiers lost self-control in Somalia in 1993 whilst, in the same operation, a unit of US Army Rangers was overwhelmed and butchered, with soldiers' bodies dragged through the streets in full view of those watching CNN. In Rwanda in 1994 the international community stood by and watched as 800,000 were slaughtered, and Dutch troops were humiliated in Srebrenica in 1995 when their rules of engagement did not permit them to respond to Serb ethnic cleansing. Many opposed the operation in Iraq, but in Syria today tens of thousands are dying as the world watches, seemingly powerless to do anything about it. Should we get involved, or stay out of it? Can there be such a thing as a 'Just War'?

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In our second reading some soldiers go to John the Baptist to ask what they must do to be saved. He doesn't tell them to leave the military; rather sadly I always feel he tells them to be content with their pay! But, more importantly, he also tells them not to abuse their power. As the 'Message' translation puts it: "No shakedowns; no blackmail – and be content with your rations." Jesus meets a Centurion and tells the people around Him that He hasn't found such faith anywhere in Israel. Peter goes to the house of another Centurion - Cornelius – and baptises him and his household - perhaps the first non-Jewish, Gentile, family to become Christians. And Paul constantly uses examples of soldierly behaviour in his letters. None condemn soldiers for being soldiers.

Our first reading came from Joshua. Walking alone before the first of the 40 or so times that he will lead the Israeli army into battle he meets a man with a drawn sword in his hand - and he asks a very sensible question; are you on our side or our enemies? The answer he gets is pretty unhelpful – neither. But then the man declares that as the commander of the army of the Lord he has now come. Joshua falls to the ground and asks 'what message does my Lord have for his servant?' As he begins the campaign to secure the Promised Land Joshua has to learn an important lesson; he is not in command here. God is. Joshua has a decision to make – will he follow God's direction or cut his own furrow. He receives what must have appeared to him to be a most ridiculous battle plan; march around the city over 7 days and blow some trumpets - and the question is will he do what he is directed to do? We know of course that he does what he is told – and the walls come tumbling down. God is not an Englishman or an American – and He is not a mercenary to be summoned to fight our – or anybody else's - battles. It is not about whether He is on our side – the real question is: are we on His side? Are we aiming to use force in order to establish Justice and Righteousness, or to simply apply brutal power in conquest?

One of the stranger episodes in military history, recorded in the Book of Judges, happened about 3000 years ago. It is. The Hebrew nation is being attacked by a very aggressive nation, the Midianites, and to defend themselves they assemble an army 32,000 strong under Gideon's leadership. As he prepares to engage the Midianites in battle Gideon asks the Lord another very sensible question: are we going to win? The Lord's reply is that Gideon's army is too big for Him to deliver Midian into his hands, and He must therefore announce to the people that anyone who **'trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead'**. I have to tell you that I never tried this on my soldiers! 22,000 leave and just 10,000 are left. Still too big says God; take them down to the water to drink. If they lap the water like a dog, leave them behind; if they lift the water to their mouths, keep them on. 9,700 kneel down and lap the water - only 300 were left to fight. But with this tiny army Gideon gains a famous victory using what today we would call Manoeuvre Warfare. What is going on here? Not defence cuts! Put simply the Good Lord is giving practical reality to the statement that echoes through the pages of the Bible, best summarised by Zechariah as: **'Not by might, nor by Strength, but by my Spirit' says the Lord.**

One of the Components of Fighting Power that I referred to earlier is called the Moral Component - which is all about the ability to get soldiers to fight, and if necessary to die for the cause. At the heart of Fighting Power is the **'Will to Fight'**; the determination to succeed against all the odds. What is it that gets young soldiers to go out on a patrol in places like Iraq or Afghanistan, knowing that there is a fair chance that they will be injured or killed? And how do you get them to fight fairly – not to abuse their power? The British Army's answer to that question lies in establishing 3 fundamental things:

- The Motivation to achieve the task in hand;
- Effective leadership and management from those placed in authority.
- But, crucially, all underpinned by an Ethical Base and a Moral Cohesion;

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The Moral Component rests on words like trust and loyalty, duty and honour, integrity and courage, friendship and love - within both those who command and lead and those who are commanded and led. It also relies on a sense of justice and righteousness and a determination to adhere to certain codes of behaviour – to follow for example the Geneva Conventions and the Laws of Armed Conflict. And, just as importantly, to face up to the reality that we - like any other organisation - are made up of flawed human beings who get it wrong; and when we do get it wrong we need to acknowledge that and deal with it. This is what separates the ‘good’ army from the brutal – between an Army that uses its power to be a ‘Force for Good’ and a destructive one that abuses its power.

Jesus journey to the Cross – His mission – is to win a cosmic battle; to deal with individual sin and establish a way back to the Father for everyone who is prepared to follow Him. And nothing will distract Him from that. In Luke’s Gospel, Ch 10, He famously tells His disciples to go out as lambs among wolves without a purse or bag or sandals. But less often quoted, in Ch 22 v 36 – just before His arrest, trial and crucifixion - He reverses the instructions: “..if you have purse take it, and also a bag; and if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one....and the disciples said; ‘See, Lord, here are two swords.’ ‘That is enough.’ He replied”

Some say that Jesus call to find a sword was heavily ironic, or that He spoke in frustration. I’m a simple soul and I reckon Jesus tends to say what He means and mean what He says! I recently exchanged emails with a Christian Regis Professor of Ethics at a rival University who said: ‘I confess that I’ve never thought about this before. The meaning does seem obscure. But any scepticism about just war significance only works if Jesus was speaking figuratively - that is, if he didn’t really mean them to take the two swords. If he meant what he said then it’s one more reason not to read Jesus pacifistically.’

If Jesus was leading a movement where non-violence was a critical article of faith, it seems to me to be inconceivable that his followers would be carrying swords in the upper room and the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest. But it is also clear to me that, whether or not they carrying weapons for their own or His defence, then Gethsemane was not the time to use them; Jesus had a mission to fulfil and He would not be diverted from it. But does this mean, as some say, that we are never to use the sword?

There are those who argue that better an unjust peace than a so-called just war; this is easy to say when you are the one living in peace – less so if you are the one living with – or dying amongst - the injustice. The problem with the pacifist position is that it does require the rest of the world to leave them along – a perennial weakness. Sadly the world doesn’t tend to leave us alone. Even the Mennonite’s abandoned their pacifist principles in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution, fighting back in the end against the brutality levelled against them – a controversial decision still debated today.

Watching the D-Day commemorations on Friday reinforced my view that in a world of injustice there are some things worth fighting – and if necessary dying for. That there is such a thing as a ‘Just War.’ Will we always get this right? No, of course not. But that doesn’t mean that we should retreat into inaction; we didn’t in 1914 or 1939, or several times since – and sadly we will be called in action again the years ahead. So, as a Christian and a soldier, can I ask you to pray regularly for those involved in the maelstrom of events? And pray that, individually and collectively, they will seek Gods guidance and do His will in the situations they face.

Amen

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