

Anzac Day (April 25th) Homily

On this occasion it seems appropriate to reflect on how we, as disciples of Jesus, are to respond to violent aggression. Sadly, we belong in a world in which some people choose to pursue their own self-interest and ambitions by inflicting violence on those whom they perceive to be thwarting their greed. Let us look firstly at certain principles that guide our response on a person-to-person basis and then look at things on a larger scale.

Person-to-person aggression

Jesus clearly states the goal. He wants us to be perfect as his Father is perfect. In other words the kind of perfection on which we are to set our hearts is the kind of perfection that he found in God his Father - a perfection of love that was so strong that it could not be overcome by evil. God continues to love those who oppose him. Jesus asks us to do the same:

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may truly be children of your Father in heaven"(Matthew 5:44-45).

We are to go out to others offering them peace. In some communities an offer of peace is indicated by offering a kiss on both cheeks. Jesus says that if, having offered our right cheek we are rejected, we should not alter our behaviour, but continue with the peace offering by offering our left cheek (Matthew 5:39). Like Jesus, we are to be proactive in love, not allowing ourselves to be ruled by those in our world who reject peace.

However, this does not mean that we are simply to accept aggressive behaviour from others. This does no good to the perpetrator or to ourselves. However, neither should we retaliate by behaving in the same oppressive way. Two wrongs do not make a right. Paul tells us:

"Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good"(Romans 12:21).

The key is to keep loving – that is to say we must have the courage to "do the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). There will be times when by exposing evil we can overcome it and bring about the conversion of the person who is behaving badly towards us. However there are times when the other person simply refuses to change. Where resistance is ineffective we may have only one option - namely, to be like Jesus and to suffer the injustice while remaining loving, and while not allowing the injustice to make us bitter.

Larger scale aggression

On a larger scale this is much more problematic. Where others are involved, where aggression brutally attacks the innocent and defenceless, where human values are disregarded and whole communities are in danger of being wiped out before the naked aggression of people who refuse to listen to reason, there is absolutely no Christian merit in being socially or politically apathetic, or in being fearful and cowardly, or in standing by and allowing ourselves and others to be crushed and broken. We exist in a world where violence must be curbed.

While we can learn much from Mahatma Gandhi, the most Christ-like response has to be worked out in the complexities of each particular situation. This is difficult when propaganda perpetrates prejudice rather than truth, and, even when we are able to sift through the lies that inevitably corrupt information in situations of fierce conflict, it is seldom if ever absolutely clear as to what is the appropriate response.

The Vatican Council states that there can be situations where it is morally appropriate to use force to resist aggression.

"As long as the danger of war persists and there is no international authority with the necessary competence and power, governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defence once all peace efforts have failed"(GS n.79§4; quoted Catechism n. 2308).

For a war to be just the following conditions must be fulfilled (Catholic Catechism n.2309).

- the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave and certain;

- all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
 - there must be serious prospects of success;
 - the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs heavily in evaluating this condition.
- The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have the responsibility for the common good"

War is clearly an evil. But we sometimes have to choose the lesser of two evils. One cannot exclude the possibility that in given circumstances war may be the lesser evil. If this is so then one must be careful to place appropriate limits on the conduct of the war. The question is not peace versus war. It is war as an instrument to achieve peace versus other strategies. When we speak of the need for war for the "common good", this can no longer be thought of in national terms. Our vision must be global, for all men and women are children of the one God of love.

In situations where the use of force is shown to be necessary and so morally appropriate for defence against unjust aggression, force must not be used indiscriminately. However difficult it is to draw the line, attempts to draw it must be made. Vatican II states:

"Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and humanity itself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation"(GS, n.80).

In 1983, the Bishops of the United States issued a timely reminder of the main principles to be considered in making a moral decision in this complex area¹. They included the following considerations:

"No Christian can rightfully carry out orders or policies deliberately aimed at killing non-combatants" (#148)

In regard to nuclear war, their teaching is clear:

"The danger of escalation is so great that it would be morally unjustifiable to initiate nuclear war in any form" (##152). There is "no moral justification for submitting the human community to this risk" (#159)

The Catechism points out certain strong moral reservations concerning the argument that weapons can be stock-piled as a deterrent (n. 2315).

Pacifism and therefore conscientious objection is a position consistent with discipleship of Jesus, and can indeed be a moral imperative for persons and communities who live within the graced environment of Christian living. But this does not make it a realistic choice for a political community which comprises a vast majority of non-saints. In this setting the pacifist performs a prophetic role of reminding all of us of a value towards which we should strive and which must be part of the agenda for practical decisions. Christian moral living simply cannot be lived by those who are not sustained by the Christ-life. It cannot be supposed or self-acquired. It is also morally authentic only when accompanied by commitment to repair, relieve and rehabilitate the threatened world and its inhabitants (see Catechism n. 2311).

Today we honour the courage of those who gave their life and those who risked their lives in war to defend our country. It may be that in some cases they were victims of propaganda. It may be that others did wrong in asking of them this enormous sacrifice. Certainly we must learn from their death or their risk of it to work against violence in every dimension of our personal and social life. We do not want what they went through to be in vain, and we must not forget their heroism. And so, while we struggle with the moral complexities surrounding the subject of war, we trust our loved ones and the unknown men and women who have died for us - we trust them

¹Catholics and Nuclear War: a commentary on *The Challenge of Peace: God's promise and our response*, the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral on War and Peace, May 3rd, 1983. A National Pastoral Life center Publication edited by P. Murnion [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983].

to the love of God and pray that he embrace them in his care. We pray also for those who returned to us but are still suffering the terrible effects of war trauma, As well as the families and loved ones who have suffered the loss of a loved son or daughter, father or mother, sister or brother.

While committing ourselves to build communities of love, free of prejudice and concerned to reach out to every man and every woman and every child, we ask God to give eternal life to the dead and forgiveness and healing to us all. The Catechism concludes the Church's teaching with a quotation from Vatican II:

"Insofar as people are sinners, the threat of war hangs over us ... but insofar as we can vanquish sin by coming together in charity, violence itself will be vanquished and these words of Isaiah (2:4) will be fulfilled: 'they will beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation. They will not learn war any more'(n.2317).