

## "THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE AND VIETNAM"

TEXT: "And when He drew near and saw the city He wept over it, saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hid from your eyes'"  
(Luke 19: 41, 42)

### INTRODUCTION

Today we share World Order Sunday with the broad family of churches in America. In a disordered world, it is fitting that the Church should observe a World Order Sunday. Many ministers across our land this morning are examining this conflict in Vietnam through the eyes of Christian responsibility. I count myself fortunate that I am minister of a church that provides me with a free pulpit, a pulpit that does not confine its concerns only to 'spiritual' matters, but seeks to relate the Gospel of Christ to every province of life - the political no less than the personal.

You should know how I conceive my role in dealing with a subject as complex and controversial as the war in Vietnam. I am a Christian preacher and teacher. I stand in the pulpit Sunday by Sunday not to air my own views but, appointed by you and representing you, to expound Christian beliefs and principles as they bear on every day life and to offer guidance as to their practical application. William Temple, the great Archbishop of Canterbury, once said, "It is the office of Lambeth to remind Westminster of its duty to God". On our side of the Atlantic that may be rendered thus: it is the office of the churches and the synagogues to remind the White House and Congress of their duty to God. And for the persons voicing this reminder this is a heavy and a grave responsibility, one that should not be done lightly or casually, and I rely on your understanding as I address myself today to the greatest moral issue facing this nation.

### BURDEN ON THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

I began with a fact that is unquestioned and unquestionable: the war in Vietnam is a great burden on the Christian conscience. It is a burden on the public conscience. Not only those who say "stop it", but those who approve it in principle are deeply troubled over the nature of it, the course it is taking and may yet take. To pick up the papers and magazines day after day and read the dispatches of correspondents in Saigon, and to look at the pictures that accompany those dispatches, is a searing experience. For men and women for whom the New Testament is the rule of faith and practice, for whom Christ is the Lord of all life, this war is a heavy burden on the conscience.

For one thing, there is the inhumanity of the war that we - a civilized nation - are waging. War at any time is cruel, but modern war is brutal and beastly. It is deplorable that the youth of this nation should have to be schooled in it. No matter how often we read about the type of war we are waging we cannot become indifferent to the burning of whole villages and the bombing of unpredetermined targets and the slaughter of many innocent people - people we are supposedly there to help.

Let me read a portion of a letter from a GI to his father, a letter which was printed in one of our papers in March of this past year:

"Today we went on a mission and I'm not very proud of myself, my friends or my country. We burned every hut in sight... when the ten helicopters landed....we were firing the moment we hit the ground....so everyone around us is crying, begging and praying that we don't separate them and take their husbands and fathers. The women wail and moan. Then they watch in terror

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as we burn their homes, personal possessions and food. Yes, we burn all rice and shoot all livestock.

"Some of the guys are so careless. Today, a buddy of mine called into a hut: 'La Dai' which means 'come here' and an old man came out....he told the old man to get away from the hut....and as he pulled (on his hand grenade) the old man got excited and started jabbering. After the grenade exploded we all heard a baby crying from inside the hut. There was nothing we could do....after the explosion we found the mother, two children, ages about 6 and 12, and an almost newborn baby. They were all huddled together. We dragged out the bodies onto the floor of the hut. It was horrible. The children's fragile bodies were torn apart. We looked at each other and burned the hut. The old man was just whimpering outside the burning hut....we walked away and left him there. I wish I could have cried, but I just can't anymore...."

It's reported that increasing numbers of our soldiers returning from Vietnam require psychiatric treatment - it's no wonder. It is no wonder that our government, which gives us a weekly rundown of enemy dead and our own casualties, does not publish totals of civilian dead and wounded, because it would appall us. I have read in several different places recently that many more civilians than soldiers are killed in South Vietnam. It is no wonder that in a recent CBS poll of the South Vietnamese, 81 per cent of them expressed a desire for peace under any conditions. What does it matter to them who kills them? They just don't want to be killed anymore.

For another thing, there is the ineffectiveness, some would say the futility of the war we are waging. Filing a dispatch from Saigon some time ago, James Reston reported a high officer telling him:

"Despite our victories the force ratios are running against us. They are replacing fighting units faster than we are. They are sending cadres of regular North Vietnamese officers and technicians to form new units out of the Vietcong, and at the present kill-rate this war could go on forever"

As you know, with each successive failure to subdue the National Liberation Front the Administration has sought a solution in escalating the war - from 15,000 advisers to 500,000 troops. Theodore Sorensen writing in the latest issue of the Saturday Review which appeared on the news stands on Thursday has an article that I would commend to you entitled The War In Vietnam: How We Can End It. It begins with this paragraph:

"I have not previously spoken out publicly against our course in Vietnam. My years in the White House made me more conscious than most private citizens of the burdens our President bears, more aware of his unique access to information, and more unwilling to add fuel to the fires of dissension within my party and country. But I believe that the President's friends and supporters today can best serve him as well as the country by speaking out: not by offering oversimplified solutions or personal criticisms; not by questioning anyone's motives or credibility; not by reflecting on the skill and courage of our fighting forces; but by helping to seek before it is too late a reasonable, feasible course in Vietnam that offers some hope of achieving an early peaceful settlement - a course with costs and risks more proportionate to America's interests than this present avenue of expanding escalation and slaughter"

Mr. Sorensen, in referring to the escalation further on in the article says this: "When two doses of penicillin failed to help the patient, we gave him four, then six, now eight. It is high time we realized that penicillin is not what this patient needs, and more can only poison him.....it is difficult for a great power to alter its course - but the Soviet Union pulled its missiles out of Cuba and received world praise for doing so...."

As far back as December of 1964, the cost of military aid to South Vietnam was reported to exceed \$1.5 million dollars per day. It must be far in excess of that figure now. How long is the escalation to go on. How many more troops must we send. One American military leader has said that 2,000,000 US troops will be required to root out the terrorists in the South - village by village. And even 2,000,000 he suggests may not be enough. How far are we to go? "To the bitter end" was the answer some time ago of our Secretary of State. What did he mean? Having failed to win the war in South Vietnam, it has been extended to the North. If our efforts fail, must we continue expanding the war on even more massive scale. As it is, all the evidence seems to show that just as the bombing of Germany and Britain did not bring their governments to the peace table and just as Pearl Harbor did not weaken America's resolve to resist, so every fresh bombing of the North has stiffened the resistance of Hanoi and welded the nation together. We have dropped more bombs on that largely primitive, peasant economy than we unloaded on all of Europe in World War II, and the evidence - the overwhelming weight of the evidence - still fails to indicate that it has brought us any closer to the hour of peaceful settlement.

We know that with further escalation Hanoi becomes more and more dependent on Communist military assistance. China and Russia will inevitably be involved in the same kind of full scale operation and World War III might well be upon us.

Meanwhile, the little people, the peasants of Vietnam, are caught in this fear-some crossfire - land ravaged, crops spoiled, homes burned, sons compelled to fight on one side or the other. One observer says that they are interested first in being alive, in seeing the war come to an end, and that if they were free to say what they feel they would tell everybody - the NLF, the Saigon government, the North Vietnamese, and the Americans - to get out and to leave them alone. South Vietnam has been described as a "lush, green trap in which most of the population is caught at the cross roads of conflicting interests". The plight of these people is surely a burden on the conscience of scores of persons in this land. As Eugene Carson Blake, President of the World Council of Churches" has said:

"The picture of a great and wealthy nation mobilizing each month to bring a tiny, long suffering, dark-skinned nation to capitulation, means clearly that the more we win the more we lose, when the swamps of the Mekong Delta are filled with dead Vietnamese, and when the flower of our youth lies dead with them, what victory will have been achieved....."

BUT...WE MUST BE REALISTIC

But, it will be objected, we have to be realistic. If we get out of South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese will move in and Communism with them. If we fail to hold the line against Communism in South Vietnam there will be new infiltrations and encroachments elsewhere in South-east Asia. Communism is a global movement and its aggressive, expansionist policy must be contained. While we have no wish, as it has been put, to be the world's policeman, as the most powerful nation in the West we have the major responsibility for defending the "free world".

It is claimed that the war in Vietnam, while a war for national liberation, is also a war to check the influence and domination of Communism. To move out would be a policy of appeasement and Chamberlain's experience following his pact with Hitler in 1938 at Munich should put us on our guard against any soft line toward either China or Russia, who are, more than may be the case with us, apt to make pawns of the Vietnamese. Broadly speaking, this is the position of those who back the Administration and the war in Vietnam, a position that most people hold. If the United States were to get out without a guarantee that the independence of South Vietnam would be assured against threats from the North, it would be swallowed up in the expanding world of Asian Communism.

That this is a position meriting consideration and respect was brought home to many by the publication of a letter written three days before he died by the late Adlai Stevenson. A group of American citizens, scientists, writers and artists had urged that he resign from office since they felt sure he was out of sympathy with American foreign policy. In his reply he said:

"It is precisely this pre-supposition that I do not share with you. Whatever criticism may be made over the details and emphasis of American foreign policy, its purposes and direction are sound. I do not think the idea of Chinese expansionism is so fanciful that the effort to check it irrational. And if you argue that it should not be checked, then I believe you set us off on the old, old route whereby expansive powers push at more and more doors, believing that they will open until, at the ultimate door, resistance is unavoidable and major war breaks out. This is the point of conflict in Vietnam".

AND YET THE QUESTION HAUNTS US

And yet the question will not down. The question still comes back to haunt us, to disturb us: is this war we are waging - the inhumanity of it, the ineffectiveness of it, the deepening morass of it - is it really holding the line against communism?

Stevenson's name is still a great name to many of us. But so is Walter Lippmann's and Arnold Toynbee's, and U Thant's, and Senator Fulbright, and Pope Paul - and others. Lippmann, for instance, in countless articles has derided as "half-baked" the notion that the war in Vietnam will be a decisive factor in the struggle against Communism. "Rebellion" he maintains, "is a home-grown product" and cannot be stamped out once and for all by "stamping out Red-China". And Toynbee says, and I quote him because his sentiments are those of many Europeans, Africans, and Asians and Americans - that our picture of communism is a "mirage", and that the reality we are up against is something much more formidable - namely the determination of the non-western majority of mankind to complete its self-liberation from Western domination - a domination from which it has been suffering during the last 200 years. The European Western colonial powers, Toynbee would remind us, have read the signs of the times and have abdicated. Britain's renunciation in 1947 of her rule over India, Pakistan, Burma, and Ceylon was the decisive act. America, he claims, without realizing what she has been doing, has made herself the heir of British, French, Dutch and Japanese colonialism and consequently has drawn upon herself all the odium that the European and Japanese colonialists formerly excited. This is a formidable heritage: and even America's military might will not be able to shoulder it for long.

WHAT THEN SHOULD BE DONE

The question we face then: is what can be done? As (Christian) members of a world-wide family we must remind ourselves and our government of our convictions - that we believe that war in this nuclear age settled hardly anything and may destroy everything, - that we believe that unilateral action by the US in southeast Asia will not lead to peace, and that we must

seek with new determination to unite our efforts through the United Nations and its concerned members. We would call on Christian people to do two things:

- (1) The first thing we must do and perhaps the most difficult and most important is to maintain our spiritual and ethical sensitivity and keep before us our awareness of the imperatives of the Christian Gospel. In wartime, this is often the first casualty. These imperatives we all know, for they are clearly written in the New Testament. "LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND PRAY FOR THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU" "IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM..." "AND HE MADE FROM ONE EVERY NATION OF MEN TO LIVE ON ALL THE FACE OF THE EARTH..." "DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD, BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWAL OF YOUR MIND..." "DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL, BUT OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD..."
- (2) Let peacemaking be the priority of our Christian witness so that we may be truly children of God in these difficult times. It is in connection with this that your ministers would put before you the name of a citizen's organization in which we have great confidence. Called NEGOTIATION NOW, it calls for a halt in the bombing and a negotiated settlement of the war, looking upon this as a "moral alternative to our stated policy of bringing about negotiations by force, or to the devastation of all out war, and a more realistic alternative than unilateral withdrawal". If you find that you can accept as a concerned Christian citizen the broad guidelines of this organization, then we call on you to stand up and be counted by adding your name to the list of names on the sheet that appears on the Community Room bulletin board. If you wish to have opportunity to study and examine the issues in greater depth, through the eyes and the mind of Christ, then we invite you to share in the study sessions that have been arranged for this purpose that begin on Thursday night of this week.

With this war in Vietnam the greatest moral issue facing this nation, it is indefensible for Christians to be on the sidelines. Says Mr. Sorensen in his concluding paragraph:

"Whatever quantities of national courage, understanding and unity are required on our part today to fight and accept the war in Vietnam, they will be needed in twice those amounts to find and accept the peace - before it is too late. But fine it we must. While we cannot afford to overlook any dangers, neither can we overlook any opportunities. A new opportunity may be approaching in the holiday season. We have been able to arrange in recent years a Christmas cease-fire in Vietnam. If we plan and work for it now, we can be prepared this Christmas to have the firing cease forever".

To this end, let us dedicate ourselves. Together, let us silently here at the end of this worship service, pray for it to happen.

PRAYER Help us, O God, to see the things that make for peace among the peoples of the world, to see those things that are now hidden from our eyes. Grant us, as Christian citizens whose love for country runs deep, but whose love for Christ runs even deeper, to have courage to be peacemakers. This we ask in the name and spirit of Him who came among men and whom men called the Prince of Peace. Amen

And President Johnson this past week assured the Prime Minister of Singapore that America will see the struggle through in Vietnam no matter what comes. We shall "ride the tiger" to the end, he said. This dramatic symbol of the problem, of course, provoked his critics to recite the old limerick:

"There was a young lady of Niger,  
Whom smiled as she rode on a Tiger.  
They returned from the ride with the lady inside,  
And the smile on the face of the Tiger"