

## "THE CHRISTIAN AND THE WAR"

### INTRODUCTION

I think all of us would agree right here at the beginning of this sermon that it is no easy, comfortable matter to try to relate the Christian faith to what is happening in Vietnam. The problems are so complex, the solutions so elusive, the reactions so emotion-laden that you and I alike might wish that coming into this peaceful sanctuary this morning we could ponder something other than this raw sore in the side of the world.

It is an issue that has divided the nation. It is dividing families as well. In talking to one of the men of our church on Thursday afternoon, I remarked to him that I was planning to preach on the war. He responded by saying that he was part of the silent majority, that his wife was part of the vocal minority, and that his nine-month old son was simply vocal.

Nevertheless I am under the conviction that one thing far worse than the discomfort of the church's involvement in this subject would be the false comfort of the church's silence on this issue. As I understand the Gospel, we are under marching orders to subject all of life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and this does not permit an exemption for the agony that is Vietnam. I think I know some of the dangers that are inherent in such a course - and one of these is the danger that the pulpit may become the platform for one man's political and social views. I do not want that to happen. I should prefer to come at it by sounding some of the dominant notes that I hear in the Christian Gospel, and then set us to thinking what they mean about the responsibility of the church and the individual Christian toward Vietnam.

### THE FIRST NOTE

The first note I would sound grows out of the Biblical proclamation that God stands in judgment above the nations and is not the automatic ally of any nation. The Bible is a running commentary on the ways in which God kept breaking into the affairs of the nations with his judgments and his directions. We think of Moses going before Pharaoh and defying the might of Egypt with his God-directed, "Let my people go". We think of Elijah before Ahab, Isaiah before King Ahaz, Nathan before David, Jesus before Pilate, Paul before Agrippa - all of them bringing word from another realm and proclaiming loyalty to another sovereign. One cause of the crucifixion is capsuled in a few words in John's Gospel, "Pilate said to the crowd, 'Shall I crucify your King?' They answered, 'We have no king but Caesar'. Then he handed him over to be crucified".

The Christian interpretation of life insists that men do have a King beyond Caesar, an allegiance beyond country, some convictions arising out of conscience regarding the sacredness of all life - and this insistence has been a part of the distinctive proclamation of the church. Sometimes that proclamation has been made clearly and courageously; sometimes it has been muted and molded to prevailing pressures. When Hitler was shouting and striding across Germany, there were many in the German church who took refuge in silence and acquiescence, thinking that the political order was above criticism. But there were others - Niemoller, Bonhoeffer, Diebelius - who spoke out. And enough of the later there were to cause Albert Einstein to make this tribute:

"Being a lover of freedom, when the revolution came in Germany, I looked to the universities to defend it....but no, the great universities immediately were silenced. Then I looked to the great editors of the newspapers....but they, like the universities were silenced in a few short weeks....only the church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing

truth. I never had any special interest in the church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration because the church alone has had the courage and the persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am forced thus to confess that what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly".

Thankfully, there is a great contrast between the dictatorship of Hitler and the democracy of these United States. By and large, this has been a magnificent country for the church to speak its message and do its work. Freedom of worship and the freedom of the pulpit have nowhere in the world been more respected than in our native land. Nevertheless, I am sometimes disturbed by what seems to me to be a not altogether uncommon view that the church must be careful never to say or do anything that is contrary to national policy or the majority opinion. This is a strange concept of the church of Christ, for the church then becomes something of a comfortable side-chapel of American culture, rather than a sometimes uncomfortable channel of the word of God. And not only does this hold true for the church, but also for other areas of life in this land including the television networks.

I think that no one ever said it better than Abraham Lincoln when in the midst of the Civil War, he remarked: "I am not so concerned that God should be on our side as that we should be found on his side". This is the everlasting concern of the church. When William Temple was Archbishop of Canterbury, he said, "It is the office of this position to remind Westminster of its duty to God". On our side of the Atlantic, it may be rendered thus: it is the office of the church, of the synagogue, of the seminary to remind the White House and Congress,, the State Legislature and Town Council of their duty to God.

So when you come into this or any church, you should expect to hear some distinctive word - a word that is not the echo of the Pentagon or a reflection of the latest Gallup poll or a sympathetic response to some speech - but rather a word that bears some relation to the Word of God - the judgments of God - the deed of a God who "so loved the world that he gave his son...."

#### THE SECOND NOTE

Go on now to consider a second note which stands out in the symphony that is the Gospel - simply that force is never a **final** answer in solving problems involving human relationships. Jesus said it very simply: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword". And not only did He say it, but he lived out his life in the confidence that there is another way - a way other than vengeance and violence. And Calvary was the climax of a confrontation between those who trusted in force and this man who trusted in love. You know how that confrontation was resolved - except that it was not the final act in that drama - and the world is not yet rid of that strange man of whom Paul said: "He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility".

I think at some levels of our lives, and in some degree, we have learned the lessons that he taught. In our personal lives, we know that unbridled tempers and unleashed force never really solve our problems. In our homes, we know that superior force is no permanent conqueror of rebellion and discord. In our cities, towns and states, we have learned that some degree of mutual trust and cooperation is indispensable to any civilized existence. At some levels, we have made some advances across the centuries.

But when it comes to relationships between nations, mankind is still barbaric in his ultimate resort to mass murder as a means of settling differences. Arnold Toynbee, passing through Manhattan a while back said:

"It makes no sense to divide the planet up into 125 little bits and call them sovereign. Yet emotionally we're not ready to give this up. The question is whether we are going to get over nationalism or destroy ourselves in an atomic war".

We in our churches need to be reminded from time to time that the Christian interpretation of life implies that God loves the whole world - geographically, all places; chronologically, all times; demographically, all people. And the real patriot, in my judgment, is the one who can help awaken his country to the new fact of world history and prepare his country for a useful life within it.

However we may feel individually about the Vietnam conflict and recognizing that people who call themselves Christian are in disagreement on the precise solution to the war, surely as Christians we must be in agreement that war itself is evil, archaic and barbaric! United States fatalities in this war are 40,000. Try to humanize that figure, if you can. For instance, the ushers at our church march to the chancel with the offering plates at the rate of two a second, double file. If we were to begin at 12 noon, we would be here until after 5:30 to witness the procession of our Vietnam dead. These are not units, these are not forces, these are not troops, these are not casualties - these are men! - sons, husbands, brothers, friends.

And then multiply the anguish that has touched thousands of home in this land on our side with the anguish that has touched unknown thousands on the other side. Consider the billions of dollars that are being diverted from constructive to destructive ends. The practices of war and the principles of Jesus Christ are contradictory, and I do not see how any Christian can help but feel the tension.

So it is that the consciences of many Christians are facing a crisis and are deeply concerned over our country's continued involvement in this war. And contrary to some of the prevailing views, those who protest are not ~~not~~ "effete impudent intellectuals snobs", or communists, or mis-guided, irresponsible youth, or maladjusted middle age men - many of them are churchmen, leaders of the business community, and leaders of our great universities. Some have expressed doubts concerning the protest movements in this country and the demonstrations for peace. I do not share those doubts. Protest movements are as old as the Bible. The great prophets of Israel were among some of the earliest protesters and those who threw the tea into Boston Harbor in 1776 were doing some protesting, too, against a colonial power. I look upon the protest movements in this country as being salutary and beneficial. We would have greater cause for worry if no one cared enough to speak. It was only twelve years ago that George Sokolosky in an editorial commented upon what he felt was a danger: "The passion for protest" he remarked, "has disappeared even in those countries that call themselves democractic". Times have changed in twelve years. And at times the form of protest may not be congenial to one's style or temperament, but this should not blind us to the basic rightness of protest movements in a free society.

Thirty years ago, the late Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a prophetic sermon in which he warned that Europe was plunging headlong into a war that nobody wanted and that the name of the emotion most responsible for the drive war fear. Sometime ago in the New York Times, James Reston gave this remarkably similar diagnosis of the present crisis:

"The most powerful force in world politics today is fear. The nations are now spending more money on wars and preparations for wars than the sum total of all the national incomes of all the underdeveloped countries on earth. All the thoughtful

political leaders know this is mad, but fear drives them on and fear differs from one country to another. The world awaits for one of the great nations to take not a critical but only a marginal risk for common sense and the human family".

This is not a preacher (although some would call him St. James) - but a newspaper columnist, but those words I take it are very much in the spirit of Jesus when He said: "They that take the sword shall perish by the sword", and "Blessed are the peace-makers". Those are distinctive words that you should hear in the church of Jesus Christ. As a Christian minister talking to my own country and countrymen, and in the light of my understanding of the Gospel, I believe that my country should be great enough and spiritually sensitive enough to take great risks for peace and demonstrate to the world the sincerity of our professions for peace. I should like to think that our leaders in Washington share this same deep concern, and that our President, confronted with the complexities of a difficult and dangerous situation, confronted with conflicting forces and contending factions both at home and abroad, is acting for peace, and that he will, in keeping with his campaign promise, and in response to rapidly mounting concern across the nation, step up any and all moves that would bring the fighting to a halt and return our servicemen home.

#### THE THIRD NOTE

Take one other step now to consider a third note of the Christian Gospel as there comes through loud and clear, strong and vibrant, a basic respect for persons. I think we can hardly appreciate the new dignity that Jesus gave to human beings who had been treated as chattels and cast-offs - women, children, foreigners, even his enemies. He treated them with a consideration that the world had never seen - and left his followers with a new vision that focussed upon the sacredness of human personality. To him, life was more valuable than any idea as to how life should be lived. (chat)

This note in the Gospel is often silenced in a time of war. At home, people become fiercely intolerant of opinions contrary to their own, and stoop to all kinds of villification and vindictiveness. Sometimes it has been the militarists who have been guilty. Sometimes the articulate advocates of peace have been less than peaceable in their methods. I think any man who lets his passion for peace or his support of the war drive him to hatred, to bitterness, to vindictiveness toward his fellow man is himself something of a war casualty. ~~I think this needs to be said alike to ardent supporters for the war and to the ardent skeptics of the war.~~ The Christian, especially, is under orders to keep alive in his heart some fundamental feelings of fairness and respect for the person with whom he may differ.

But most of all, this concern for human beings becomes a war casualty at the world level. Recall the anti-German and anti-Japanese hysteria of 25 years ago which seems a little ludicrous in the light of personal and national friendships since established. Some in this congregation remember all too well, for it touched them personally, It has been pointed out that there has not been as much of this kind of hatred in this war and if this be true, it represents some advance. But if we are not guilty, we do tend to be guilty of indifference to the plight of those who are being hurt most by the war.

We even become insensitive to the suffering of the people both in South and North Vietnam. The homeless in South Vietnam number over 2 million and half of them are children. This means non-combatant casualties - burned, wounded, hungry, sick. And as for the people of North Vietnam, we tend to become even more indifferent and insensitive to what they have been going through. If someone is inwardly protesting that it is not fair to talk about suffering in Vietnam without placing a share of

the responsibility at the feet of the Communists or the Vietcong, I agree. But again - I am a Christian minister, citizen of a country that considers itself a Christian nation, and I understand that the Christian should feel and speak some concern and compassion that goes far beyond the comprehension of the communist.

At any rate, this is the distinctive note I hear in the New Testament, and I hope that you will never come into this or any other church and hear the sound of hatred lifted in the direction of any fellow-man. I hope that you will hear such incredible words as "I say unto you, 'Love your enemies'" "You are my disciples, if you love one another". "If your enemy is hungry, feed him". And I hope that you will go out from here determined to keep alive that strange tension between what men call the practical realities of the world in which we live and the heartbeat of the Galilean - for it might be that even yet He would turn out to be the Supreme Realist.

PRAYER Eternal God, for our world, we pray - this broken, suffering, fearful world. And for our country, our allies, our enemies, we lift our hearts in prayer, that still we may learn to live as one family of man, the family of God's children. And finally for ourselves, we pray - that we may grow yet more into the mind and the spirit of Christ, whose Lordship we affirm and whose way we so often lag behind in following. In His name we pray and in His spirit. Amen