
THE IRISH
COMMISSION
FOR JUSTICE
& PEACE

THE IRISH
COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES

**what
the
Bible
says
about
VIOLENCE**

FOREWORD

Peace Education, particularly among our young people, has become a matter of growing concern and interest to Christian educationalists.

The first of this series, "What the Bible Says About Peace", has had a wide circulation, and the demand has been such that we have had to reprint several times. A series of similar booklets is now planned (see inside back cover).

With 'What the Bible Says About Violence', we have produced a Study Guide which is an excellent follow-up in the series. Adult Groups within denominations, Ecumenical Groups, and Secondary Schools should find the material of great value for their peace education programmes.

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"Physical force and violence, and the threat of them against persons and property to achieve political and social ends, has been a recurring feature of life in Ireland for centuries". (Violence in Ireland Report).

"Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun". (Mao Tse-tung).

"I can't see the objection to spraying people with napalm if it makes the world a better place to live in". (An American Air Force Officer).

"Violence is the policy of barbarians. Non-violence is the policy of men" (Gandhi).

"You have heard that it was said 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you, do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left". (Jesus).

PAPER 1

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT VIOLENCE

THE GOD OF ARMIES

Ps. 46, 1-7; Ps. 24; Exod. 3, 1-14; Lev. 26, 3 & 12.

"The Lord of Hosts" or Yahweh Saboath is a phrase so evocative of worship that it comes as a shock to find that the French read in their Bibles "le dieu des armees" - "the god of armies". But that, of course, is exactly what "the Lord of Hosts" means. We find examples of this in some of the Psalms, where the victories celebrated were not always spiritual victories over temptation or suffering, but often hard physical victories over human enemies. That is what a god was for. The Lord God of Israel was god of Israel only, not of other nations.

To understand this we must go back to the Genesis account of the Fall of Man. Whatever historical events may lie behind the story, Genesis clearly states that at the dawn of history man cut himself loose from God the Creator, and was in a state of alienation from Him. Yet religious instinct still pulled people to worship something, so they came to worship gods, who were often projections of their own ambitions, lusts, and aspirations, sometimes imaginary tribal ancestors, or personifications of national characteristics (ancient equivalents of John Bull or Cathleen Ni Houlihan).

The period of slavery in Egypt was critical in their understanding of the divine revelation. The people were depressed both physically and spiritually and seemingly without hope. The way was open for Moses - a man himself "open" as the great patriarchs had been to the breath of the Spirit - to offer them as *their* god, the God who had spoken to him and earlier to Abraham and who would lead them to freedom (Exodus 3, 14-15; Lev. 26, 12).

God was still seen as the exclusive God of Israel having the duties of a tribal god, a sort of combination of mascot and field-marshal as is implied in the title "Lord of Hosts" or Yahweh Saboath. Yet it was through the Israelites God chose to reveal His true nature to man, as we see in the developing

understanding of judges, kings and prophets. Over a period of many centuries the Israelites moved from worship of a tribal god, to a monotheistic faith, when they came to see that the god they had thought of as the god of Israel was indeed the one God over all the earth.

The limitations imposed by such an understanding of human history and divine revelation facilitates understanding of those parts of the Old Testament which are aggressively or even violently nationalistic. Otherwise belief in a loving and caring God of all men seems to be contradicted.

FOR GROUP WORK:

1. Collect and list things in the life of our community which suggest that we still sometimes think of God as a tribal god - ours!
2. Read current daily newspapers and church papers and list things which point to "tribal god" attitudes.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Do we expect God to be "on our side"? If so, does that mean he is not with "the other side"? If so, is it because our conduct is better, our belief more accurate, or the justice of our cause more apparent? If not, have we any right to expect victory or to pray for it?
2. How do you understand God? Can you see him as Yahweh - a God always with us, caring for us, saving us, drawing us to himself? Can you see this as his attitude to all people?

FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION: Humility is

the God of the Universe accepting worship as the god of Israel;
the Son of God taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2, 7).

PAPER 2

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT VIOLENCE

BRINGING GOOD OUT OF EVIL

Judges 2; Isaiah 11, 1-9; 31; 53; Jeremiah 7, 1-15

In a world adrift from God, violence became a part of every day life, and much of the narrative of the Old Testament is concerned with war. The first duty of a tribal god was to make his people win, and the Israelites repeatedly called on their god to do just that. But the people soon learnt that even in war, sheer might is not the only determining factor (Isaiah 31). Morale and unity are even more important. The book of Judges is one long sermon on words spoken by Jesus centuries later, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6, 33). When they neglected their religious heritage they fell apart and were prey to their enemies.

Another lesson to be learnt was that God's people do not always achieve physical victory. It was not that God deserted or failed his people, but that he judged them (Jeremiah 7), but in this judgment were the seeds of redemption.

At yet a later stage in their history, the Israelites are pointed to the hand of God at work even in the conquests made by a great pagan power (Isaiah 45, 1). Out of such experiences, which seem to be utterly negative, God can bring good.

The message of the prophets is clear - victory is not necessarily the best outcome of a hostile situation. The oppressed may have more to offer the world than the oppressor. This insight receives its most moving expression in Isaiah 53. Christians have seen in this servant-song an interpretation of suffering which they find perfectly exemplified in the life and death of Jesus.

The prophets also have a vision of the Day of the Lord, when all war shall be overcome. In both Isaiah and Micah, who were contemporaries, we find identical words "They shall hammer their swords into ploughs, and their spears into pruning-knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again" (Isaiah 2, 4; Micah 4, 3). In its more nationalistic form

this vision sees Israel as pre-dominating over other nations, and from this is derived the expectation of a conquering Messiah, an expectation current in the lifetime of Jesus. In its purer form the belief makes Israel's God the presiding power in a new world order. It is He who will rule, and it is His law which will proceed from Zion to judge between the nations.

FOR GROUP WORK

1. Israel broke their Covenant with God, and so lost their right to His protection. From a study of the passages mentioned in this Paper, list the specific ways in which good was brought out of evil.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. If "victory is not necessarily the best outcome from a hostile situation" what is a proper hope for Christians in Ireland today?
2. What would be the characteristics of society in Ireland which would ensure that "they shall sit every man under his vine and his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid" (Micah 4,4), and "each of you will invite his neighbour to come and enjoy peace and security, surrounded by your vineyards and fig-trees" (Zech. 3, 10)?

FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

The writer of Isaiah 53 had a supreme insight into the motives that would animate the conduct of Jesus - Jesus said to us "if any man will come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me."

PAPER 3

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT VIOLENCE

THE MESSAGE OF LOVE

Hosea 2 (especially vs. 19-20); Hosea 11, 1-4; Deut. 6, 4-5; Lev. 19, 18, 33-34; Matt. 22, 34-40; Luke 10, 29-37; Matt. 5, 43-48.

In the Old Testament the English word "love" is used as a translation of two different Hebrew words. One of these words is sometimes described by scholars as "election love", referring to God's choice of Israel as his people. The other Hebrew word is "steadfast love" or "covenant love", reflecting God's fidelity in the care of His people.

The prophet Hosea, with his illustrations drawn from the experience of loving a faithless wife and cherishing a tiny child, drew an analogy between human love and man's relation to God. His analogies give a warm and living content to the words.

Two key Old Testament statements are Deut. 6, 4-5 and Lev. 19, 18. When Jesus was asked which were the most important commandments, he referred to these, saying that in them the whole message of the Law and Prophets was summed up (Matt. 22, 34-40). From the almost continual strife of Israel's existence had come the insight that love was paramount - love of God and love of neighbour.

But "Who is my neighbour?", they asked him. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus gave his immediate answer (Luke 10, 29-37); and in the Sermon on the Mount (at Matt. 5, 43-48) he stated the general principle, that the duty of love extends beyond "our people" to all our fellow men, even to those whom we classify as our enemies.

It is worth while to consider how close is the parallel between the situation reflected in that parable and that of modern Ireland. Jews and Samaritans were separated by traditions going back several hundred years. The cause of separation was partly ethnic, the Samaritans having an admixture of foreign blood from settlers brought in by

PAPER 4

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT VIOLENCE

LIVING THE MESSAGE

Matt. 21, 1-11; Matt. 23; Luke 19, 28-40; Luke 23, 32-38

Jesus was no armchair theorizer. He was subject to hostility throughout his ministry and was eventually put to death by his persecutors. So we find in the gospels the circumstances in which he practised what he preached. He loved his enemies at close quarters, under stress and when they were actively hurting him. Certain things become clear as we study the way in which he exercised his love.

Firstly, we see that for Jesus loving his enemies did not mean condoning evil. He spoke out repeatedly against the abuses of those in power; he had hard words for the rich and for religious leaders. Though no doubt he knew how to draw the distinction between hating the sin and loving the sinner, he did not pretend that those who sinned (as the rich and the powerful sinned) were really quite nice people at heart. He loved them in spite of the fact that they were not (Matt. 23).

Secondly, it is clear that Jesus, at any rate in his own situation, rejected force as a way of correcting injustice. The Jews were looking for a saviour from a foreign occupying force and in the so-called triumphal entry Jesus seems quite deliberately to have repudiated that idea by a kind of dramatic parody of it. Indeed he will enter his city at the head of his supporters; but he will do so "meekly and riding upon an ass", his forces are country folk and children with palm branches, and the message of this King who comes in the name of the Lord is "Peace!" "He shall teach peace to the nations" (Zech. 9, 9-10; Matt. 21, 1-11; Luke 19, 28-40).

The Messiah has indeed come; but his victory will not be to destroy evil men but to bring good out of evil. His immediate action after the entry is not to challenge the foreign civil authority, in which the injustice resided, but to "cleanse the Temple". Much is made of this incident by some, as being inconsistent with his teaching; but, whatever the symbolism of

foreign imperial powers. It was partly religious reflecting a "reformed" (Jewish) and an "unreformed" (Samaritan) version of a common religious faith. The two groups shared the country, but each predominated in certain areas. The country itself, although all subject to Rome, was partitioned, one part being under "direct rule". The memory of Jewish "ascendancy" during the hundred years of the Hasmonean Kingdom (roughly 160-60 B.C.) remained strong, and "ascendancy attitudes" persisted although the Jews no longer had political control. How much closer can you expect to get? Every time we say "our people", in the exclusive sense that the phrase carries in Ireland, we should remember what Jesus said in reply to the question "Who is my neighbour?"

FOR GROUP WORK:

Collect and list instances of the word "love" in the many senses in which it is used today. How many of these senses are relevant to "Christian love"?

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. It is not practical for a Christian individual or group actually to practice neighbourly love to everybody. But do we in fact exclude any groups or individuals from our concern because of who or what they are? Is the Victorian concept of the "deserving poor", for example, Christian? or the Ulster concept of "our people"?
2. Is there any point in making comparisons like the one made above between the Jewish/Samaritan rift and Protestant/Roman Catholic rift in Ireland?

FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION:

After reading Hosea 2, consider whether any estrangement is beyond the possibility of reconciliation.

the whip who can doubt that it was by his moral authority rather than by physical force, that he achieved the withdrawal of the traders from the temple courts? (Matt. 21, 12-13)

Certainly at his own arrest he rebuked those who sought to defend him with a sword and in one Gospel he is represented as making good the injury so caused. Luke records his words at the moment of crucifixion as "Father, forgive them, for they know what they do". The conduct of Jesus under extreme stress was a living out of his message of love. Easter is seen as a victory beyond defeat; where self-defence would have been self-defeating (Luke 23, 32-38).

FOR GROUP WORK:

1. Collect the "angry" sayings of Jesus and analyse the concept of "righteous indignation" - its use and abuse.
2. Study the background of Old Testament texts to the "cleansing of the temple". Can we see the cleansing as a symbolic action showing that the Messiah has come? Consider Isa. 56, 7; Jer. 7, 11; Zech. 14, 21 and Malachi 3, 1. Also compare this with Luke 22, 51, and Luke 23, 34.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Does Jesus Christ liberate from oppression or only from our own sin? Is there a relationship between the two?
2. Is it justifiable to compare the sacrifice of Jesus with the sacrifice made by a soldier who loses his life in battle, or in a Northern Ireland ambush?

FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION:

When a missionary's wife in the Congo (1965) saw her husband murdered by members of his own church (caught up in revolutionary fervour), she said "Now they have no one to teach them". *The Times* said of this. "We hear echoing down the ages the words 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'."

PAPER 5

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT VIOLENCE

CONSCIENCE AND DUTY

Romans 13, 1-7; Acts 4, 1-31; 5, 17-42; Revelation 13

Paul's admonition "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13) has been used in two ways: to condemn rebellion against the State by those who feel oppressed; and to condemn conscientious objectors who carry their repudiation of violence to the point of refusing to perform military service. The latter, when challenged by fellow Christians with this passage, have often quoted Peter's reply to the authorities in Jerusalem, Acts 5, 29, "We ought to obey God rather than men". Revelation 13 also reflects a radically different attitude to the state, which at a time of persecution, is seen as evil.

In the early centuries military service was largely avoided by Christians and one or two of the martyrs were soldiers punished for desertion after their conversion. There is no mention of Christians in military service before 170 A.D. By then there seems to have been a number of Christians in one legion (Eusebius "History of the Church" written in the fourth century). Like the Philippian gaoler and Cornelius, they may well have been in service *before* their conversion, which is a little different to undertaking service when already a Christian. The real change of attitude came after the official recognition of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in 313, when the view prevailed that it was the duty of a Christian man to take up arms at the command of the civil magistrate.

The view has never been without challenge from some Christians. The Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren (not to be confused with the Brethren Assemblies in Ireland), and the Society of Friends are examples of churches which maintain the principle of non-participation in military service. Individuals from other churches who have felt the same calling often owe to these churches the fact that in some countries provision for exemption or alternative service is made. Despite

this many Christians have suffered and some have died for this principle in our own century.

St. Paul's words were written when the state was autocratic and, to all intents and purposes, universal. With the growth of nation states and of democracy, the individual's relation to the state has radically changed. It is no longer a question simply of obedience but of a share in the responsibility of decision: not "Am I right to obey?", but "Is my country right to fight?"

Attempts to accommodate the challenge of Christ's message of love to the realities of a strife-torn world led to the formulation of the doctrine of the "Just war" which states that (1) the cause must be just; (2) there must be no other way; (3) there must be a reasonable prospect of success; (4) the means must not involve a greater evil than the injustice which it seeks to correct; (5) the authority declaring the war must be legitimate.

Even before the days of nuclear weapons (which have an obvious bearing on the fourth of the "just war" conditions) it proved well nigh impossible to regulate the frightfulness of war, once started. Many Christians have the gravest misgivings about the compatibility of this doctrine with the teaching and example of Christ.

Whatever our answer to this question in general terms, it is worth pointing out that a Working Party of Roman Catholics and Protestants, pacifist and non-pacifist, agreed in 1975 that even if the doctrine of a "just revolution" was valid, the conditions to justify violent action do not exist in Ireland today. (Violence in Ireland - A Report to the Churches, page 90).

FOR GROUP WORK:

Adjust the criteria given above for a "just war" to fit a revolution by force. Then apply the criteria to the situation in Ireland today.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Consider Prov. 25, 21-22 and Romans 12, 20-21 - has this any bearing on international relations today?

2. How does our national expenditure on "aid" compare with our expenditure on arms?
3. How do you "Render unto Caesar", when "Caesar" is everybody at the ballot box?

FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION:

"Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free."

PAPER 6

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT VIOLENCE

RECONCILIATION

Matt. 5, 21-26; 2 Cor. 5, 16-21; Eph. 2, 11-22; 1 Cor. 13;
Col. 1,19-20.

The classical Greek word translated as "reconciliation" in 2 Cor. 5, 18 means a change of enmity into friendship, the bringing together of those who had been estranged. So, in the context of the epistle, it denotes the restoring of relationships between man and God and between man and man. Whatever be our conclusion about the rightness or wrongness of an ultimate appeal to force, most will agree that reconciliation should be the goal of the Christian. Perhaps then the criterion is not the degree of force that it entails but whether or not it is compatible with a subsequent reconciliation. Words, as well as deeds, may make that outcome more unlikely.

In Northern Ireland subversive groups exist in both communities and they immensely complicate the task of reconciliation. Detection and punishment of the subversive elements on both sides cannot be avoided, but it needs to be carried out in a way that does the least possible harm to the relations between the two communities. Action must be such that it does not render impossible the ultimate reconciliation of all groups, including those whom the other side regard as subversive. No person or group should be written off as irreconcilable.

No one pretends that reconciliation is easy; the gospel makes the cross its instrument and reminds us that we also have a cross to take up. Let us conclude with a description of the process of reconciliation taken from the report 'Violence in Ireland' - "Christians must seek reconciliation between parties separated by barriers of injustice or by traditionally hostile attitudes. Reconciliation begins with a sincere and patient effort to understand as fully as possible the case for the opponents' points of view. It continues with an honest attempt to weigh that case against one's own and to see where justice

lies. It proceeds to a resolute search for common ground or for means to remedy grievances without creating counter injustice. It culminates in a willingness to repent of past wrongs, to make costly overtures and to run major risks, whether of rebuff or treachery. It is inspired throughout, not simply by a desire to put an end to a difficult situation, but by a positive and God-given will to establish relationships of love and charity with all men."

FOR GROUP WORK:

Study 1 Corinthians 13 and consider how its precepts can be applied to the relations between communities.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How can the punishment of politically motivated crime be made compatible with the reconciliation of politically divided communities?
2. Relate and discuss examples known to members of the group of action taken in local situations along the lines of the description of reconciliation quoted from the report 'Violence in Ireland'.

FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION:

"... and has committed to us a ministry (a service) of reconciliation." Am I a peacemaker or merely a peace keeper?

This adult study guide is produced as part of the Peace Education Programme of the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. Already produced in this series is 'What the Bible says about Peace' and 'What the Bible Says About Justice'. Also planned are 'What the Bible Says About Reconciliation ... Love ... Politics ... Freedom'.

The guides are being jointly produced by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, 169 Booterstown Avenue, Co. Dublin, phone Dublin 885021, and the Irish Council of Churches, Inter-Church Centre, 48 Elmwood Avenue, Belfast, BT9 6AZ, phone Belfast 663145. Further copies or information may be obtained from either of these addresses.

USEFUL READING

Violence in Ireland: A Report to the Churches 1976 (Pub. Christian Journals Ltd. and Veritas Publications).

The Non-Violent Cross: by James W. Douglas (Pub. Collier Macmillan 1969).

Faith & Violence: by Thomas Merton (Pub. University of Notre Dame Press, U.S.A. 1968).

A Different Dream - Non-Violence as Practical Politics: by Christopher Sugden (Pub. Grove Books 1976, Bromcote, Notts, England).

A Christian Perspective on Violence: by Paul H. Ballard (Pub. British Council of Churches, 2 Eaton Gate, London, SW1 W 9BL, 1980).

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