

Pathways to Peace: Seeking a Christian Narrative

This is the text of a lecture given in Blean Church on 13 October 2016 as part of our autumn programme, "The Peace of God". Some of the views may prove slightly controversial and there was in fact some lively debate after the talk. It is therefore important to note that the text represents an accumulation of the author's personal opinions, even though many supporting reference sources are given in the footnotes. The talk was a much extended version of a sermon (presented with slides) on Sunday 9 October. A portion of the material, covering the review of Steve Chalke's book, *Radical*, will be published in an amended form in the 2016 Winter edition of *The Reader*.

Introduction

I begin with a prayer. The prayer comes from the Bishop of Dover, and it is a good one, because it sets out the key issues about peace, and at the same time it raises questions in our minds. It is the prayer he sent to all Christians in the Diocese in July 2016 when Father Jacques Hamel, the RC priest from Rouen, was murdered by terrorists in his church as he celebrated Mass.

Lord of Peace: breathe order and wisdom into our chaotic world; frustrate the plans of the wicked, offer safety to the vulnerable, and bring healing and peace to the broken hearted. May we be your partners in the task and may our churches be safe spaces for all who enter. Amen.

The questions this raises include: How can we help to bring order to our troubled and chaotic world? What power and influence do ordinary Christians have? How exactly may the plans of the wicked be frustrated? And what does it mean for all of us to "be partners" with God in the task of building peace in our world?

These are huge topics, but of vital importance to the world today. Essentially they boil down to: what is the Christian ethic for peace today? I am going to present some ideas in three discrete strands, linking where possible to selected parts of scripture.

1. In the first strand I am going to give a case study, or you could call it an analogy, linking the Hebrew Bible, that is, the Old Testament (OT), with modern war.
2. Secondly, I want to consider Jesus' teaching on peace, using especially a passage from Matthew chapter 5 – the Sermon on the Mount; and this will lead of course to discussions of its relevance for peace-making today.
3. The final strand will be to look at whether we can construct a practical Christian narrative to help prevent the spread of violence, and in particular to combat the allure of terrorism.

Strand one: the Hebrew Bible and modern war – an analogy

The object of this strand is to demonstrate that we have to be highly circumspect in using the OT when talking of peace. On the face of it, many passages in the OT are highly belligerent, and do not set a good example. The psyche of the Hebrew authors usually reflected the culture of a nation constantly at war.

I am going to illustrate this with a section from the Book of Judges, and specifically the story of Samson. If you ask people in the street about Samson they may just about remember a very strong man, who was betrayed by a seductress called Delilah. But other details of what Samson did may be forgotten.

The legend of Samson occupies four racy chapters of Judges – chapters 13 to 16 for those who wish to read the full narrative. Frankly, it is the story of an unreconstructed thug, a man of huge strength and passion, a lethal combination of spoiled brat and psychopathic killer – yet one who is ultimately written into Israel’s history as a hero.

From an early age his life seems to have been full of self-destructive impulses. Against his parents’ wishes he married a woman of the Philistines, Israel’s traditional enemies. Within days of the wedding, dissension broke out at the extended feast; Samson deserted his bride and in revenge he robbed and killed thirty Philistines to repay a rash wager made during the wedding revelries¹.

After a few months Samson returned to find his bride had been given to another man. Seeking revenge, he captured some foxes, tied torches to their tails and set them loose to destroy the Philistine wheat harvest. This cruel and vicious act led directly to the violent deaths of his wife and her family, whereon Samson murdered more Philistines. He is further reputed to have killed 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass, though we may reasonably assume that is an exaggeration².

Samson was promiscuous. After a liaison with a prostitute he was locked inside the city of Gaza, but escaped by lifting the city gates from their hinges. His affair with Delilah led to his downfall. His legendary strength was said to reside in his uncut hair. When Deborah cut his locks, he was captured by the Philistines, blinded and taken in bronze shackles to Gaza, where he was set to turn a millwheel in his prison. When he was brought from imprisonment, as sport for the Philistines, he prayed to God and, regaining his strength for the last time, pulled down the central pillars of the house, killing himself and many Philistines³.

It is sometimes stated that Samson’s ultimate faith in God and the sincerity of his final prayer redeems or justifies his life, but I suggest these arguments are tenuous at best. The “justification” at Judges 16.30: “...those he killed at his death were more than those he killed during his life” simply will not do. Israel’s ancient literature all too frequently glorifies violence and indiscriminate slaughter, and the story of Samson is typical of this genre; Samson is essentially amoral, a villain superficially dressed up as a hero of the Israelite nation. Admittedly, the ethical lens we use today is very different to the one that was

¹ Judges 14.15-19

² Judges 15.1-8, 15-17

³ Judges 16.1-30

practised three millennia ago; but by contemporary standards, Samson is still morally shoddy. His character compares poorly when judged against many Old Testament characters.

And yet the biblical account takes great pains to show that Samson was consecrated by God from his very conception. His pre-birth narrative is one of the few examples in the entire Bible where there is formulaic divine intervention. The description in Judges 14, where Samson's unnamed mother, previously barren, receives an angelic visit which contains various elements that recall the narratives of the conceptions of Isaac, Samuel, John the Baptist and even Jesus of Nazareth. Samson was born to be a Nazirite, consecrated to God "from birth to the day of his death"⁴. The strict rules for such a life include lifelong abstinence from alcohol, and avoiding all contact with dead bodies; but in particular, a Nazirite must never cut his hair during his time of consecration. One way or another, Samson appears to have violated all the rules of Nazirite life⁵.

To summarise, Samson's bullying leadership kept hostilities between the Philistines of the area around Gaza and the people of Israel boiling for around two decades. His ultimate faith in God hardly justifies his moral inadequacy; and he qualifies as a "hero of Israel", only because he personally slaughtered so many of the enemy.

That was "Samson in Gaza"; we move to Gaza in modern times.

In July and early August 2014, the Israeli army invaded the Gaza strip and waged war on Hamas, the dubious organisation with probable links to terrorism, based around Gaza City. The Israelis destroyed many tunnels linked to hostile activity beneath the Palestinian-Israeli border, and then withdrew their tanks. The invasion was accompanied by extensive aerial bombardment of Gaza and other communities in the strip, a bombardment which obliterated many homes and killed many civilians. Nearly 2000 people died in about two weeks, including 60 Israelis, virtually all of whom were soldiers. Around half the Palestinian casualties were children, including some playing on a beach, and others sheltering inside a school run by the United Nations. It is highly debatable whether Israel's actions passed the criteria for a "Just War"⁶.

The humanitarian consequences of this brief but intensely violent war were graphically shown, night after night, on television throughout the world. Images of burnt and bloody children, chaotic hospital casualty departments, grieving relatives and homes, communities reduced to rubble – all these glutted the world's newspapers and media screens. Israel was apparently surprised at the strength of the world-wide condemnation of its actions⁷.

⁴ Judges 14.7

⁵ It may be argued that the Bible provides no evidence that Samson drank alcohol, although he joined wholeheartedly into his wedding festivities, where wine would have flowed freely. J.H. Paterson in *The New Bible Dictionary* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1962, p.872) noted that the "Samson narrative does not give the impression that he abstained from wine".

⁶ See, for example, Paul Valley: Past the tipping-point of opinion, *Church Times*, 1 August 2014, p.11.

⁷ There are many media accounts of the conflict of July-August 2014. Among the most dispassionate are those within the *Church Times* of 1 August 2014 (p.3); and the various BBC websites at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east

It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that Samson was unprovoked when he waged war on the Philistines of Gaza, a people who hated the nation of Israel and would no doubt have gladly driven the tribes out of their so-called Promised Land. Similarly, no one seriously suggests that Hamas is free from atrocity, or that Israel's security is not generally threatened by some of its dominantly Muslim neighbours. But the parallels between these narratives, though divided by around three millennia, are striking, and hardly need to be stressed: same place, same disproportionate violence, and the same scenario of innocent people suffering.

I do not have time to go fully into Israel's national policies – the settlement and expansion in the West Bank; the violent obliteration of all terrorists; defence of the nation by using barriers such as the Bethlehem wall. Many of these are probably illegal in international law, and arguably damaging to world peace. Barrier walls for example came down in Europe at the end of the Cold War. They do not work, but some nations seem to want to put them up again. The wall between the United States and Mexico is the central policy of Donald Trump's bid for the White House; walls, or barriers, are being built in Calais.

Returning to events of 2014, there was a further poignant and symbolic event at the height of the Israel-Gaza conflict. Baroness Warsi, the only Muslim woman minister in the British Government, resigned on the morning of 5 August 2014, indicating in her resignation letter to David Cameron that Britain had failed sufficiently to condemn Israel's disproportionate violence, and suggesting that this would do nothing to prevent the growth of radical tendencies among young British Muslim men. On the previous evening, 4 August, at a late evening vigil in Westminster Abbey, a national service to mark the centenary of the start of the Great War, Baroness Warsi had symbolically extinguished one of the four large candles that commemorated the four years of conflict. This was her last official act as a Government minister. I will return to the notion that it is the violence of Israel and western powers that promotes radical tendencies among young Muslims later in this lecture.

Ethics in the Hebrew Bible

On any objective reading of the Hebrew Bible, there are some passages or strands which cause substantial unease. In particular, there are examples of where the people of Israel commit genocide: the utter slaughter and destruction of men, women, children, livestock and crops⁸. We cannot believe that such events were truly inspired by God.

If the genocide passages are among the darkest in the Hebrew Bible, there are other strands of literature that disquieten. The psalms of Israel, which collectively represent some of the most remarkable and sublime poetry ever written in the history of civilisation, nonetheless contain sporadic outbursts of violent rage that scandalise. These so-called "cursing psalms" invite God to crush and kill Israel's enemies: "...may [the enemy's] children be orphans and his wife a widow"; and "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock" are among the best known examples, but there are several others⁹. There are some arguments that seek to understand and to validate these portions of the psalms, noting that they signify the fear and frustration, the rage and hatred towards Israel's

⁸ Examples include the destructions of Jericho (Josh. 6.21), Makkedah (Josh. 10.28) and Sihon (Deut. 2.34). I Sam. 15 is also relevant.

⁹ The quotes are from Ps. 109.9 and 137.9; but see also Ps. 17.13-14; 149.7-9.

enemies – and thus the basic humanity of the psalmists¹⁰. This may be a valid interpretation, but it is beside the point: if violent imprecations are used in sacred literature, then this signifies an underlying culture of violence and revenge, often directed against innocent families.

Nonetheless, it would be very wrong to characterise the Hebrew Bible as ethically valueless, and full of violent anachronisms. The origins of a modern Christian ethic are to be found in these Scriptures, within the psalms, and especially within the inspired writings of the prophets. The alternatives to destruction, violence, blood, revenge and sacrifice are found in the strands of the Hebrew Bible that place emphasis on justice, mercy and equity. Here are three examples from the prophets.

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.¹¹

Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.¹²

Much of the teaching of the prophets and the wisdom of the psalmists presents and focuses upon "...the other person, the fellow human being, whose need places upon [us] an unqualified demand such that in that demand [we] find [ourselves] in the presence of God."¹³

Strand 2: Jesus' teaching on Peace

It is of course relevant to Christian thinking that the prophetic strands of teaching were vigorously taken up and expanded by the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The ethical teaching of the prophets continues powerfully into the New Testament. Indeed, it is stressed at the very outset of Jesus' ministry in the so-called "Nazareth Manifesto", which includes the words of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."¹⁴ There are numerous other examples, at least in the synoptic gospels, where Jesus takes up these themes.¹⁵

But the key passage on peace comes in Matthew chapter 5, as part of the Sermon on the Mount. The full reference is Matthew 5.38-48. I have highlighted key lines or verses.

¹⁰ See for example Etienne Charpentier: *How to Read the Old Testament* (SCM: 1981, pp.104-105).

¹¹ Hosea 6.6 – a text repeated twice in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 9.13, 12.7)

¹² Isaiah 1.16-18

¹³ John M. Hull: Mission-shaped and kingdom-focused? In Croft, Stephen *Mission-shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today's Church* London: Church House Publishing, 2008, pp. 114-132. This paper was written in the context of Church mission, but clearly has much wider theological and ethical implications.

¹⁴ Luke 4.18-19, after Isaiah 61.1-2.

¹⁵ See Hull, op. cit., pp. 121-123 for a selection of biblical references; and David Shepherd: *Bias to the Poor* (Hodder and Stoughton 1983) for an old, but still relevant, theological treatment of the New Testament ethical teaching.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matt.5.38-48, NRSV

There are parallels to this teaching in Luke chapter 6, but the Matthew version is the more comprehensive.

Jesus’ audiences, including the disciples, would have been astonished to hear him say: “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” Therefore turn the other cheek and do not resist evildoers. And if you harbour hatred in your heart, without actually committing violence, then as far as God is concerned, this is equivalent to murder – to breaking the sixth of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5.21). Jesus seems to be setting an almost impossible standard here. The literal meaning of these words is that violence even in self-defence is ruled out. It seems, on the face of it, that Jesus is prescribing pacifism – a complete rejection of war.

Christians have argued for many centuries that even if the words of Jesus forbid self-defence, they do not necessarily mean that war cannot be fought in defence of an innocent third party. This has been the view of some eminent, thoughtful and holy Christians since the time of St Augustine who wrote about the problem about 1600 years ago¹⁶. A “just war” should be for a just cause – to put right an undoubted wrong. And it must be a last resort – with all diplomatic efforts exhausted. The full criteria for a “Just War” – or “Justified War” – are given in table 1.

But can we reconcile “Just war” with the message from Matthew 5.38-48? Richard Hays (a conservative Christian ethicist) argues that “the consistent Christian witness of the NT is that followers of Jesus should not use violence, even in defence of justice.¹⁷”

The argument goes that the supreme authority and model for Christians is Jesus Christ; God, in Christ, responds to human hatred and enmity not through retaliation, but by being on the receiving end – ultimately in the crucifixion. We should live according to this pattern, overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12.14-21). The only weapons the Church should yield are

¹⁶ This and the preceding paragraph summarise the ethical arguments in Messer, *Christian Ethics*, pp. 56-61 and chapter 14 of Hays: *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

¹⁷ Messer, p.59; Hays, p.320

faith and the word of God. And the witness of the NT should of course “trump” both the OT and the previous Christian tradition of just war.¹⁸

Table 1: Just War Conditions

- It must be waged by a lawful authority
- It must be for a just cause – to put right an undoubted wrong
- It must be a last resort, with all peaceful means of resolution exhausted
- The harm done by the war must be proportionate to the good that is aimed for
- It must be waged with the right intention
- There must be a reasonable hope of success
- The war should contribute to a new state of peace

During the War

- Non-combatants must not be directly attacked
- The means used in fighting the war should be proportionate to the goals.

Criteria derived from Neil Messer, 2006¹⁹

I am not sure who is right; hedging my bets here, I find the theological case for pacifism to be strong, but impractical for the modern world. There is no doubt that military action against so-called Islamic State would amount to a Just War. I am less sanguine about condoning the recent development of drones, or the overriding case for nuclear deterrence. This debate will continue.

Strand 3: Building a practical Christian narrative for peace

In this strand, I want to describe a new book, *Radical: Exploring the Rise of Extremism and the Pathway to Peace* by Steve Chalke (Oasis Books 2016), which offers a practical approach to the world-wide problems of radical extremism and urban violence.

He will be known to many as a Baptist minister in South London, as the founder and leading light behind the Oasis Trust – a charity that helps disengaged young people – and as a special UN adviser on the prevention of people trafficking. He is an important and in many ways admirable Christian leader, whose mission blends orthodox Christian witness with practical initiatives to help people in desperate need, especially young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Like most Christians he is deeply concerned about the wars in Syria and Iraq, the associated refugee crisis and the innocent victims of terrorism and atrocity. And we know that beneath

¹⁸ Messer, op.cit., p.59

¹⁹ Messer, op.cit., p.57

many of the world's current violent and distressing episodes lurks the sinister influence of the so-called "Islamic State" (ISIS), or one of its associated terror groupings: representatives, surely, of what may be termed "bad religion".

We are seeing an inexorable rise in extremism and terrorism, much of it linked to religious fundamentalism and fanaticism. This is a worldwide phenomenon, a major threat to our peace and stability and the very antithesis of God's peaceable Kingdom. Moreover, this trend to extremism is surprisingly attractive to intelligent young people. We may recall that in February 2015 three British schoolgirls from East London – dutiful and successful students – disappeared from their homes, flew to Istanbul, and subsequently crossed the Syrian border to join ISIS. Such incidents suggest the problem of extremism will not easily go away; it is being fuelled from within our western culture and society.

The world-wide response of governments has been zero tolerance to terrorism: direct military retaliation, including bombing; or – where governments have the technology – drone attacks. The precision of some recent western military responses contrasts with the incomplete and blurred understanding of the underlying problems and the incoherent strategies being deployed to deter the growth of extremist ideologies. In Britain, the government has introduced the "Prevent" strategy and promoted "British values" (though these are ill-defined) in schools, but the impact of these measures is uncertain.

In the eyes of many experts in radicalisation, these initiatives are unlikely to influence the root causes of terrorism, for they ignore social exclusion. Some young people misguidedly see extremism as a way to "change the world" – a vision that they feel is not available to them through conventional politics; and, to our shame, neither do they see a solution within the current expressions of Christianity in the UK.

The picture, from a Christian perspective, is therefore potentially confused and a source of frustration. Religion generally is getting a bad name but, more significantly, violent and hateful crimes against humanity are being committed. Aside from the trauma to numerous individuals and families, the destructive wars of the Middle East are adding, day by day, to the world's massive and almost insoluble refugee crisis. Meanwhile the violence of terrorism is breeding violent responses. The world needs a better narrative, and a constructive pathway to lasting peace. We have to argue that this should be a Christian narrative, notwithstanding its apparent lack of attraction to many young people.

Steve Chalke's book starts to tackle these immense problems. In *Radical*, Chalke explores the relatively recent rise of extremism and summarises the worldwide threat from terrorism. There are numerous references and pointers to up-to-date research and government statistics, though these are always presented in a way that provides confidence in the analysis, and the footnotes do not obscure the clarity of the arguments

One of the most significant arguments in the book is that there is a strong association between the causes of radicalisation of young people by ISIS, or other extremist factions, and the lure of gang culture in many cities across the globe. As we have seen from recent cases, including the East End schoolgirls, the world of extremism and violence can attract intelligent young people who feel they have no voice in 21st century society. They are

frustrated and disillusioned by the shallow priorities of our western culture. This same sense of hopelessness attracts other young people into the equally undesirable and shadowy world of gangs, street violence, crime and drugs.

The book argues that current government measures to counter terrorism and extremism have no real answer to this attraction. Indeed, attempts to eliminate violent extremism by retaliation make matters worse, often increasing recruitment. On the global scale, many believe that the rise of ISIS is closely associated with the actions of the United States and its allies in the Iraq war. As Chalke comments, “The war on terrorism is a new kind of war; a war that cannot be won by governments, guns, planes, drones and traditional armies, however sophisticated they are.” A wider narrative of hope is needed to stop the grooming and brainwashing of new recruits, and to eliminate the “glamour” of violence and extremism. The key, according to Chalke, is to address social exclusion and the feelings of powerlessness; we need to build stronger and more effective communities, ones which dilute the risk of extremist recruitment and also negate the power of gangland culture.

The final chapters of this admirable book offer an example of practical Christian engagement designed to do this: a narrative that “builds bridges of peace” within the grass roots of local communities. The Oasis charity’s “Inspire” programme, *Peacemaking for young people*, was launched in February 2016. It will run for 1000 days, until the centenary of the World War I Armistice. It engages, but more significantly aims to *inspire* young people through a variety of national projects including the themes of sport, art and music. The object is for young people themselves to identify areas of conflict within communities and to be inspired through creative outlets to respond to these local problems.

The culmination of this programme will be seen in a series of events and commemorations during the weekend of 9-11 November 2018 – events which will embody the crucial themes of remembrance and hope. By helping to promote this programme, and by praying for its success, Christians may – in a small but nonetheless significant way – contribute to the elimination or at least the reduction of harmful radicalisation, violence and terrorism, the deadly things that scar God’s Kingdom.

Conclusions

- It is unwise to take the Old Testament as a template for “God’s Peace”. Nonetheless we can recognise that the prophets and psalmists often outlined the basis for modern ethical ideas around peace, especially the link with justice.
- The New Testament overall makes a compelling, but not completely watertight, case for pacifism. The criteria for a just war are still extremely relevant today, and should be the baseline for any military action that does occur. The criteria seem to be widely breached by Israel, and in the current Syrian conflict.
- There are potential Christian narratives for peace making – the Oasis “Inspire” programme is one good example.

I end with another prayer: the Common Worship collect used at the end of Psalm 76.

Majestic and gracious God: more awesome than the agents of war, more powerful than the wrath of nations, restrain the violence of the peoples and draw the despised of the earth into the joyful life of your kingdom, where you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

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