

War - To Fight or Not to Fight

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 27th of April 2003.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His subject is war, to fight or not to fight. So now every April I sit on my porch and I watch the parade pass before me.

And I see my old comrades, how proudly they march, reliving old dreams and past glories. But the old men march slowly, their bones stiff and sore.

Tired old men from a tired old war. And the young people ask, what are they marching for? And I ask myself the same question.

But the band played waltzing Matilda. And the old men, they answer the call. But year by year those old men disappear. Soon no one will march there at all.

[1 : 12] Let's pray. God, we come to the issue of war. And we are abhorred by it. And are sick in our stomachs as we see images of wars past and present.

Help us as Christians to understand the issue of war. How we should respond to the current situations of war. We pray that you'll help us to have a moral framework.

Whereby we can understand and approach these issues in a Christian way. And Lord God, we long for peace. Amen. It was a bleak and bitterly cold, highly appropriate sort of day when I went to Gallipoli seven years ago.

There was a little group of a dozen or more of us. And it was a fairly sombre day. As we got out at Anzac Cove at Gallipoli. As we got out at various little war cemeteries around the Gallipoli area.

The museum, seeing the trenches. And all the paraphernalia of war in the museum. One of the people in our little group had lost his great-great-grandfather at Gallipoli in 1915.

[2 : 19] He was younger than I am. And we set out for the cemetery plot. And as we got to it, we fanned out the dozen of us or so in the little bus. And we walked through the graveyard looking for the name of his great-grandfather.

Later on, we peered into muddy trenches where troops lived for several months in 1915. 9,000 Australians dead. 20,000 Australians wounded.

And that doesn't include the Turks, the New Zealanders, the English or the French. War is awful. Last holidays, I visited Villa Bretonneux. Which is one of the numerous war graves and memorial sites in the north of France from the first war.

Because after the failure of the Gallipoli campaign in April through to the end of 1915. And the thousands of lives lost. The Australian forces were redirected from Gallipoli in Turkey to north France.

To help bolster the Allied line resisting the German invasion through France to conquer the rest of Europe and on to Britain. Villa Bretonneux is the main Australian memorial.

[3 : 27] There were 53,000 Australians killed around that area. The Battle of the Somme from July 1916. Including in one day in July 1916.

5,533 Australians were killed. There were 18,000 Australians whose lives were lost in that area. For whom there is no known grave.

Their bodies were lost or blown to smithereens. Never able to be found or buried properly. And at Villa Bretonneux, the main Australian memorial, there is name after name after name of Australians whose graves are not known.

No one knew where their bodies ended up. But their names are on this extensive war memorial. It makes you sick in the stomach to read the names. War is awful.

And this was meant to be the war to end all wars. World War I. But it didn't. World War II came about 20 years later. It was probably as bad, if not worse, than the First World War.

[4 : 30] Lasting six years, 1939 to 1945. Perhaps the greatest atrocities of World War II were the extermination of 6 million Jews.

A third of the population of Australia today killed by Hitler's regime. And on five visits I've made to Israel, each of those five times I visited what's called Yad Vashem.

Which is the Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem. There are piles and piles of shoes and glasses, teeth and other memorabilia from people in photos and sculptures and in memorials around Yad Vashem.

Hideous atrocities that literally make you sick in the stomach. The atrocities of war and evil. And if you know little of that time, I do urge you to see things like the film's Schindler's List or on at the moment, the film The Pianist.

They are harrowing, but they help us to understand the evils of war and the evils that prompt war. War is awful and the atrocities that provoke it are awful as well.

[5 : 39] And one cannot help but be attracted by the appeal of being a pacifist in the sight of all the evil things of war. It is much more attractive to make love not war.

To stop the killing. No more body bags. Spend our defence budget on the poor. And make the world a happier place. Those sentiments are certainly attractive.

Certainly appealing. And the vision of the prophet Isaiah, several hundred years before Christ, is also appealing and attractive as we heard in our first reading.

In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills. All the nations shall stream to it. Many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

[6 : 53] Nations shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore. And that's a very attractive vision. A very attractive dream. A very attractive description of world peace that appeals to our hearts deeply.

It's a picture of all the nations, verse 2 said. Many peoples, verse 3 said. Of international peace, in verse 4. Where all the nations of the world, Jew or Gentile, Arab or not, whoever they are, wherever they are, coming together in peace and peace under God.

No more weapons of mass destruction. No more international conflict. No more defence academies learning war and producing armed forces. That's the dream.

A vision so early in the massive book of Isaiah in the Old Testament. The pacifist's ideal in many ways. It's the ideal of the United Nations. For outside the United Nations building in New York, there is a statue, a sculpture of the swords being beaten into plowshares.

That is the armaments of war being melted down and put away to become safe agricultural tools for normal business. Of course, Isaiah lived in an agricultural community where swords were the basic armament.

[8 : 04] No guns then and so on. And if his vision was to be updated today, it would be turning not swords or not only swords, but turning bombs and guns and tanks and aircraft carriers and so on into the tools of normal business.

Safe things to get on with our daily work in peace and harmony. And isn't this vision right for Christians? Jesus, after all, was the Prince of Peace. He arrived in Jerusalem on a donkey, not in an Abrams tank like we saw the American forces arrive in Baghdad just a few weeks ago.

Jesus, who urges us to turn the other cheek when we're faced with some form of violence or opposition. The one who advocated the radical ethic of loving even our enemy.

One thing to love our neighbor, that's hard enough. But Jesus says, love your enemy. And the one who himself modeled that when he hung on the cross and forgave those who nailed him there.

Isn't that a pacifist agenda? Can't we advocate that Jesus was the pacifist, the Prince of Peace, and that we should follow in his steps? Oh, that it was so simple.

[9 : 08] We live in a morally compromised and mixed up world. In Isaiah's day, it was no different, of course. The words of Isaiah the prophet came in the midst of all sorts of international intrigue and political agendas and war.

As country was allying itself with other countries, trying to get alongside the strongest country so that the people of God in Judah would be safe. And would be on the victorious side in the various wars that were going on in the day of Isaiah.

The Syro-Ephraimite war in particular in the 730s BC. The book of Isaiah urges the people of Israel, the people of Judah or the people of God, to trust God and not to trust in any politics or any military might.

It is with God that they have a covenant arrangement. And that is fundamental rather than some treaty alliance with some military power. But not for one minute did Isaiah the prophet believe that this dream or vision so early in his book was an imminent reality.

Or that it was a reality that was able to be achieved by human effort and toil. Not for one minute did he think that. As we see in the whole of the context of the book of Isaiah.

[10 : 14] You see it's not humanly possible to attain utopian peace and international peace. And certainly not from a pacifist agenda. But rather the vision of Isaiah in chapter 2 of the book of Isaiah is firmly set in the Lord's day.

In days to come is how that vision begins. That is when the Lord comes. The day of the Lord. Someday in the future. In those days to come. When the Lord comes.

Then and only then. Will the nations of the world come together to the mountain of God. Sit under God's instruction. And enjoy international peace and harmony. And the fulfillment of this vision is God's work.

It's not the work of the people of God. It's not the work of humanity in general. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established. And the implication the way that's written is by God.

Not by people. And it shall be raised above the hills. All the nations shall stream to it. It's the work of God. And not the work of God's people to do that. And indeed all this peace that is being spoken about in this vision of Isaiah in chapter 2.

[11 : 23] Comes from the fact that God shall judge between the nations. And shall arbitrate for many peoples. They are in the days when God judges. The day of the Lord. When the Lord comes or comes again to judge the world.

Then and only then will this vision of Isaiah chapter 2 be totally fulfilled. You see one of the problems with pacifists. Is that they're a bit like Mark Waugh the cricketer in the last few months.

His timing's all wrong. The pacifist agenda has got it wrong because it thinks that we can live in some form of utopian international peace now. But Isaiah knew that it would only come in the Lord's day.

When he judged whenever that would be. The time for an end to war lies ultimately at the Lord's return. But for now before the Lord's return.

We live in a time when there will be wars and rumours of wars. Jesus told us just as much in Mark chapter 13. Listen to these words of Jesus Christ.

[12 : 25] When you hear of wars and rumours of wars do not be alarmed. This must take place but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.

There will be earthquakes in various places. There will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. Now is the time of war and rumour of war. And the same you find in the book of Revelation.

Where the period in which we live is the period where the horsemen of the apocalypse are sent out. In the book of Revelation chapter 6. Until the return of Jesus. Our world is characterised by things including war.

Now war now reflects two things. Or one of two things. Either of two things. War is the inevitable outcome of human sin. Human beings sin.

We hate. We do not love. We fail to love God with all our heart, soul and strength. We fail to love our neighbour as ourself. Let alone our enemy as ourself. And here on earth all Christians as well as those who are not Christians sin and fail.

[13 : 29] Our hearts are not perfect in God's eyes yet. And so while that is the case. War is almost inevitable. Just as there is inevitable personal breakdown between friend and friend at school or university.

Or between a husband and a wife. Or a parent and a child. All sorts of our relationships are fractured and broken. War is in effect the same thing on a bigger scale. And if we can't live with totally harmonious relationships with everybody in our lives.

Then really war in the end is clearly inevitable. It's an expression of sin. Even John Lennon, one of the great songwriters of the peace movement. Was a fairly warmongering person who hit his wife and so on.

It's ironic that the peace protests so often become violent. So war now is an expression of human sin. War now is also an expression of God's judgment against sin.

So the wars and the rumours of wars that Jesus was warning about in Mark chapter 13. Were in part the punishment of God for sin. And a warning of God's future punishment against sin.

[14 : 31] When he returns and judges all people on the Lord's day. So he went on to say. At the end of warning people about wars and rumours of wars. And nation rising against nation.

He said. But in those days after that suffering. The sun will be dark and the moon will not give its light. And the stars will be falling from heaven. And the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

Then he'll send out the angels. And gather his elect from the four winds. From the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. You see war now. Is a foretaste of the judgment of God against sin. And anticipating that final judgment.

Against all sinners. And in that sense war is to make us long for the coming of Jesus. The coming of the son of man in glory. Now maybe you think. Oh this is all a little bit pessimistic.

Is the Bible really teaching us that war is so inevitable. So much part of daily life. In effect. Ought we not to be advocates against war. Shouldn't we not give in to the fact that there is war.

[15 : 30] But speak against it. Protest against it. Isn't pacifism an ideal to strive for. Shouldn't Christians make love not war. As followers of the prince of peace. Shouldn't we be peace loving.

If not peacemaking people. Because Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers. Well certainly not every war ought to be fought. But love is costly and hard.

It's all very well to say that we should be loving people. Rather than warmongering people. Love is tough and love is costly. You see love does not pass by on the other side.

When somebody else is in need. Jesus made that very clear in the parable of the good Samaritan. Love doesn't turn a blind eye to evil that is being perpetrated. About to be perpetrated.

Or has been perpetrated. That's not love when we pass by on the other side like that. Love doesn't ignore the plight of helpless victims. Love doesn't stand idle when someone else is being savaged.

[16 : 24] Or being abused or oppressed. Sins of omission. That is just walking by on the other side. Are just as culpable and guilty as sins of commission. As if we perpetrated the evil ourselves.

Yes we can turn the other cheek. When we are being opposed. But it's a different thing for Christians. When somebody else is the victim of evil. Jesus said turn the cheek when you are being opposed.

When you may be suffering as a victim of violence. But not when somebody else is. We have an obligation and responsibility. As Christians who love others. Not to pass by on the other side.

Or turn the cheek when they. Are the victims of abuse or evil. You see the second problem with pacifism. The first problem is the timing. That is the ideal of international peace.

Is future when Jesus returns. But the second problem is that it's a moral cop out in the end. There's much that is attractive and appealing. About the pacifist position. But in the end.

[17 : 24] It is so easily a moral cop out. Blind to evil. Passing it by on the other side. Turning the head away. And pretending it's not happening. Or it's somebody else's problem.

In the end. That's where a fully pacifist view ends up. Evil is ignored. And that is not love. In 1938. In Munich. In Germany.

The Prime Minister of Great Britain. Neville Chamberlain. Thought that he'd obtained peace with Hitler. He thought his policy of appeasement would work. War would be avoided. And everybody can get on with a nice life.

How wrong he was. And how blind to the horrors of Hitler's regime he was. And even during World War II. So many of the Allies did not understand the full atrocities of the Third Reich.

The abominations against six million Jews. And numerous other people for that matter as well. Is there any doubt today that the Allies attack of Germany was wrong?

[18 : 20] I would say not at all. Not at all. Millions of Jews and Poles and French and Dutch and many other nationalities have no doubt at all. But that was a war that ought to have been fought.

And maybe even harder and faster at the beginning. Well in 2003 a similar dilemma faced our world. Do the atrocities of Saddam Hussein so long ignored by the West warrant force to overthrow his regime?

The choice is a ghastly choice to make. It is not an easy decision. Do we let Saddam Hussein continue in his evil against his own people? Against the Shiites?

Against the Kurds? Against the Kuwaitis? And against all sorts of other people groups? Let alone threatening his neighbours and colluding with terrorists? Do we let him continue in those dastardly things?

Or do we plunge into war to curb him and end his regime with force? Risking lives, many lives perhaps, in order to confront evil and not pass it by on the other side.

[19 : 20] In a morally complex world our choices are not black and white. Sometimes it's a lesser of two evils and the choice is even harder when we don't know all the facts and we can't see into a crystal ball.

We must never make a decision for war lightly. But on the other hand we must never ignore the option that war may be the best option. Let me finish with a few points by way of lessons, reminders, whatever.

In this world God is sovereign. And in the midst of war, though it may be hard to see that, God is sovereign. And war for whatever reason comes under the sovereign purposes of God.

It may be his act or his using of it to bring some judgement against sin. But war is under the sovereignty of God. And no matter what human military might or bombs or technology that mankind can devise in his evil heart, God is still sovereign and he can never be bombed out of heaven.

So let not war make you lose your Christian faith. No matter what war ever happens in the future, and you'll live through more wars, I'm sure, don't let it lose your faith.

[20 : 23] In the film The Pianist, about a Polish Jew who somehow survives the Warsaw ghetto, avoids getting shunted off to concentration camp, and survives the horrors of Warsaw through the war years until Warsaw is liberated at the end of 1945, I think.

There are some Jews who have survived the concentration camp who come back, and they shout with anger at the rounded up German army, who are now imprisoned by the Allies.

And one of them shouts, you not only took our land, you took our soul. Whatever war you face, never be in a position to think that. Don't lose your soul.

God is still sovereign. Secondly, God is judge. He is the ultimate judge. He judges justly and fairly. He judges not by appearance, but He judges the heart of people, and all people will come before the judgment throne of God.

So let wars, whatever wars are in the world, and there are always a handful around, let wars be a warning to you that God will judge you one day. For some wars God uses as a foretaste of His final judgment, as Jesus warned would happen.

[21 : 37] So be warned that you will face the judgment throne of God one day, and be ready for that. Pray that war drives you and others on both sides of wars to God, rather than away from God.

That it brings people to be ready to face God. Pray that God actually brings good out of the evil of war. He promises to bring good for those who love Him.

And pray too that war may advance and not hinder the cause of the gospel of Christ. One of the saddest things of the war in Iraq is that most probably it will lead to more persecution for the Christians in that country.

Thirdly, war is never black and white in such a morally complex world. You see, God is not on one side or the other, usually in war. The kingdom of heaven is not on earth, but in heaven.

My kingdom is not of this world, Jesus said to Pontius Pilate. And so we should keep in mind that there's not obviously one right or one wrong side in war often, or usually. So we need to be careful that we don't feel ourselves arrogant or boastful that we're in the right and that God is on our side.

[22 : 44] I don't think it's always as easy as that. And maybe in the Old Testament, when God commanded the ancient people of God, Israel, to fight wars, we ought to be very, very reserved in thinking that somehow that might apply to the wars we fight today.

It's where I'm not quite comfortable with the language of a just war, and certainly not a holy war. The wars that God commanded Israel to fight in the Old Testament were very limited, and were limited to a piece of land that God had promised them.

And those wars were God's act of judgment and punishment against the sins of the inhabitants of that country. And that was it. And God didn't command them to fight wars beyond their territory, even though there were times when they did.

But that was because in the Old Testament, the conception of the people of God under God's rule was geographically located on earth in what is now Israel-Palestine. But for us, we know that the promised land of God to us is in heaven.

So not on earth are we going to be fighting to somehow achieve the promised land. God's kingdom, Jesus' kingdom, is in heaven. And therefore, no war that is fought ever since Old Testament times is a holy war, one in which God is clearly on one side or the other, and this is the people of God, and they're not the people of God.

[23 : 55] There are Christians in every country of this world, and any war will be compromised. So we need to be careful. War is not a black and white issue, nor is patriotism clear. We must be very careful to make sure our allegiance is fundamentally to God and God's values, over and above our allegiance to our country.

There are times when Australia will do the wrong thing, not the right thing. So beware of too much feverish patriotism. But also, war is never black and white because we do not know all the facts.

We are in a position of ignorance. And it's the same with the Iraq position, it seems to me. We don't know individually the real threat of Iraq, what threat it represents to other countries near it, how much it is colluding with terrorists, whether it has weapons of mass destruction, if so, whether it would ever use them, or whether it would ever pass them to Al-Qaeda or other terrorist networks.

We don't know. We don't know all the facts. And if we were to choose to go to war to end Saddam, which has obviously happened, we don't know all the facts there about what that war will be like.

You can't go to war and know how many people will be killed in war. That is, you can't at the end of the day say, this course of action kills so many civilians, this course of action kills so many, therefore this is better because there are less civilians killed.

[25 : 10] We don't know that. We don't know all the facts. And so beware of that. We don't know all the facts. We don't know all the facts. We don't know all the facts. We don't know all the facts. We don't know all the facts. We don't know all the facts. And so what's going on, I guess, is that we're trying to weigh up what is the better course of action.

And a simplistic pacifist view is a moral cop-out. What we've got to work out is which is the right course here. Is this war justifiable, if not just, to try and curb a real threat?

Or is actually the course of war a greater evil? And they are very difficult decisions to make. The final point. Jesus is coming back. Isaiah's vision was in these last days, in the days of the Lord.

And for us as Christians, when Jesus returns, that is, that is when the vision of Isaiah's peace will be fulfilled. Jesus is coming back. And wars and rumors of wars are signs of the end times.

Jesus made that very clear in that passage in Mark, amongst other places in the New Testament. So in the world in which we live, this morally mixed up and compromised world, in a world in which we are sometimes at war, but certainly there are wars in our world, even if we're not fighting in them.

[26 : 19] Pray that Jesus comes quickly. Come, Lord Jesus. All right. All right. God bless you. Amen. Let's pray.