

## **NO PAY-BACK: 27<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY C**

You and I are living in worrying times. In rightly rejecting terrorism, we too are vulnerable to attacks, not only with the usual weapons of war but also with germ and chemical warfare. Some of the words of the prophet Habbakuk in our First Reading today speak strongly to our shared situation. Feeling helpless in the face of danger, the prophet's prayer to God is one of frustration. The prophet is totally frustrated that God has not stepped in to stop all his people's pain and suffering, anxiety and fear. His prayer is one of loud groaning and lament: 'How long, Lord,' he prays, 'am I to cry for help while you will not listen; to cry "Oppression!" in your ear and you will not save? ... Outrage and violence, this is all I see...'

In reply, God gives the prophet only one message, a simple message. It is much the same message that Jesus gives us today in his parable of the master and the servants. 'No matter what happens, don't lose hope. Keep on doing the just and right thing. Keep on being faithful to God in what you do for others.' Just like those heroic fire fighters and police persons in New York on that terrible day known to the world now as '9/11'! They deliberately went into those burning buildings to rescue people trapped there, and for their bravery some of them paid the ultimate price, the loss of their precious lives.

We are living with a frightening dilemma: - How to stop and how to prevent the lethal attacks from cells of terrorists operating in many countries, possibly even in our own? But is going to war the answer? And if it is, are there any limits to waging war? Under what conditions might the declared war on terrorism be completely just? Do those conditions exist in the current situation? Or is more to be gained by a deliberate policy of non-violence- the policy for the independence of India from British rule that was successfully led by Mahatma Gandhi? The policy too for equal civil rights that was successfully pursued by black people in the USA?

After the first Gulf War, Pope John Paul II said about that war- these are his words - '[it] leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred that makes it all the more difficult to find a solution to the very problems that provoked the war'. I'm reminded of the words of Jesus, who taught non-violence, that sooner or later those who use the sword will be destroyed by the sword (Mt 12:52).

The first Christians were forbidden to take part in war. One reason was that killing, even of an aggressor, violated the command of Jesus to love enemies. It also violated the NT teaching to overcome evil with good. After the year 381 when the Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the state religion, things began to change. Christians ceased to be pacifists. In the early 400s St Augustine taught that violence could be an act of Christian love if it was necessary to protect one's neighbour from unjust harm, and especially the weak and the innocent. In the 1100's St Thomas Aquinas built on the teaching of Augustine and contributed to what is known today as 'the just war theory'.

Gonzaga High School, Washington DC, is an all-boys Jesuit institution. Many of the boys pass the Pentagon to and from school. On the day after the attack on the military headquarters in 2001, Carol Corgan was teaching social justice to the senior boys. Emotions were raw as

they struggled with feelings of anger and grief. Nearly every one of them spoke openly of getting revenge. Carol knew that she had to change gears with her lesson that day. She decided to share with them Catholic teaching on when a war is just.

She patiently explained the seven conditions for going to war: - 1. There must be a just cause. 2. The lawful competent authority must wage the war. 3. It must be for a good goal or purpose. 4. It must be a last resort. 5. It must probably be successful. 6. There must be a proportion, a balance, between the evil that is inflicted and the good one hopes to achieve. 7. Persons who are not fighting in the war, i.e. civilians, must not be directly attacked.

Raised on 'Blow 'em up movies', some of the boys listening to their teacher did not like the limits set by the just war theory. Many were particularly surprised that a just war would not permit the targeting of civilians. Their teacher insisted that killing non-combatants is never appropriate, even if, as at Hiroshima in 1945, it helps to end a war. She insisted that in principle a nation might go to war, but this was a 'yes, but' kind of thing. You have a right to defend yourself, yes, but no, there are limits to what you may do. Orange lights are blinking on this one, between the red saying 'no go' and the green saying 'go for it'.

As the days went on, quite a few boys told Carol that they had been giving a lot of thought to the issues. Some said that the issues would count a great deal if they found themselves drafted for military service. This might well happen, since they were all 18 or nearly 18. One boy said that his mind was already made up. He would simply have to be a conscientious objector.

We need to face the fact that there has been some strain and some breakdown for many years now in the relationship between the Western world and the Arab world. What on earth was going on in the minds of the terrorists of that 9/11 wickedness to inflict such horrific and inexcusable atrocities on thousands of innocent people peacefully going about their lives and work? Perhaps some sense of insult and injustice felt by the terrorists might be part of the answer.

Now to ask this question is not to take a 'Blame the victim!' approach. What I am suggesting is that retaliation, revenge, and all-out, unrestricted war on terrorism will not work effectively and permanently to bring about all-round justice. There must be conversation and dialogue with those people in the Middle East and with their leaders, who correctly or incorrectly, are feeling that the West in general has done them wrong. And if, when and where it is clearly established that wrongs have been inflicted by either side, those wrongs must be admitted, and then made right as soon as possible..

The whole matter, though, is terribly complex. So for a just, peaceful and lasting solution, let us cry out to the Lord, both here at this Eucharist and at all other times, words of groaning and words of lament, including these we find in one of the Psalms, 'How long, O Lord, how long, before you hear and heed your people's please?'

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