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‘A book of peace or a pretext for conflict?’

The Bible is a book of violence and warfare, blood-letting and carnage. I don't think anyone can dispute that. For a large chunk of the Old Testament is about Israel invading the Promised Land of Canaan and driving out the native population. City after city is attacked, pillaged and destroyed. Entire populations are massacred and all their valuable goods are seized and placed into the Israelite treasury. Suddenly we realise what the conclusion to all those marvellous stories about Moses and the Exodus are all about, and we don't like it. For the only way that the new Jewish nation can establish itself is by committing genocide and adopting a scorched-earth policy. And warfare continues throughout the years as Israel defends itself against its neighbours or even wins back land that it has lost.

And what is worst of all is that this destruction is explicitly carried out in God's name and with a divine mandate. All too often God assumes the mantle of Commander-in-Chief and, through his servants such as Joshua, appears to give very precise military instructions. We, as Christians who believe in a peace-loving God, are appalled as we read these stories – indeed, we prefer not to read them. And people who may be thinking about our faith must find these accounts are utterly disgusting. Quite rightly they question the integrity of a God who not only seems to have blessed such atrocities (which is bad enough) but initiated and directed them.

When we turn to the New Testament we find a picture so different that we ask ourselves, “Is it the same God that is being talked about here?” For Jesus tells his disciples that peace-makers – not warriors – are blessed. He forbids his disciples from ever hating or doing any harm to an enemy, but commands them to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them - indeed, doing these things is a precondition of being children of Jesus' Father in heaven. And Jesus suits his actions to his words: when he is arrested, he not only offers no resistance but heals a soldier who has had his ear chopped off by one of Jesus' disciples, misguidedly lashing out with a sword.

And it goes on. Paul tells us not to take revenge, but to love our enemies by caring for and feeding them. He does, admittedly, talk about taking up weapons and putting on armour but it is quite clear (contrary to what the Crusaders may have thought) that he is speaking in purely symbolic and spiritual terms. Indeed, most early Christians refused to join the Roman army and took the command, “Thou shalt not kill” at face value. The only violent deaths in the early Church were of Christians who refused to offer any resistance to the power of the Empire. The notion that, hundreds of years later, the Christian Church would quite literally be sending armies into battle against the heathen is one which would have filled them with horror.

So everything seems very clear: the Old Testament is full of bloodshed and slaughter but Jesus has replaced all that with love. We are still left with a rather awkward joint between the two halves of the Bible but at least we know where we stand now. Unfortunately things aren't quite so simple. Not only do we have several allusions to the Christian life as a conflict, we also have some very awkward words of Jesus where he quite openly says, “You must not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). And he goes on to say, in a quotation from Micah, how families will be cleaved apart by his Gospel. Clearly we can't wriggle out of the Old Testament quite as easily as we thought, nor can we think of Jesus as only the Prince of Peace.

However, I do not think for a moment that Jesus was suggesting the use of violence to settle family disputes! It seems to me that Jesus is using the word “sword” as a metaphor to describe the division that his message would bring between those who accept it and those who reject it. Indeed, I understand that the word he uses here can mean both “large knife” and “a tool for dividing, division”. And we have certainly seen many people in the history of the Church who have rejected their families' religion and become Christians, leading not only to ostracism but even so-called “honour” killings. The prophecy, “Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents

and have them put to death” has literally come true. But this is no charter for the Christian to take up arms; rather, Jesus was warning his disciples that they would encounter violence from those unwilling to accept his Truth.

So we've got that sorted! But there is still a thought nagging in the back of my mind, which is this. In the Old Testament it is the whole nation which is being told by God to go out and slaughter their enemies. In the New Testament the commands are much more to do with personal morality and the situation in which the Church finds itself – and we must remember that the Church is little more than a tiny sect with virtually no political influence. If that is true, then the New Testament has nothing to say about these big issues of military policy and national security. These are things which we have to work out for ourselves. And we are not always sure how to do so. Both peace-makers and war-mongers have justified their actions from the Bible.

But isn't this what Christians always have to do? – work out what God is saying to us by seeking to catch the entire drift of Scripture. The New Testament rarely gives us laws or even guidelines: as I have said several times recently, all we have are generalised principles such as “Love your neighbour as yourself”. But it does seem to me that the angry, land-grabbing and aggressive God of the Old Testament, whom I am sure we all dislike, appears to undergo a transformation by the time we get to Jesus. Suddenly he is less interested in the fortunes of one nation and more concerned with the eternal destiny of all people, less concerned with military triumph and much more taken up with spiritual victory. Has our God – who frequently proclaims himself as “changeless” – evolved into something nicer? Or is it simply that our understandings of him have improved over time? That is not an easy question to answer.

But I do think one thing is clear. No longer can Christians rush forth into battle as crusaders with an unhesitating belief that they must be doing God's will. No longer can they cheerfully loot, pillage, rape and destroy, confident that they are doing so with divine blessing. Jesus' teaching cannot allow that. Instead one hopes that today's Christians will always take up arms with extreme reluctance, knowing that anyone they kill or maim is a valuable human being, created and loved by God just as much as they are. We can have no truck with the idea that the only good German (or, in today's context, the only good Muslim) is a dead one. And one hopes that politicians and generals will always bring a sense of caution and hesitation into any military operation, constantly asking whether it really is using the least amount of violence and achieving a truly laudable aim. These are surely the minimum standards the Bible asks of us. Sadly, even leaders who go by the name of Christian do not always abide by these principles and take decisions which cause other Christians to despair.

But violence and warfare must always be the sad actions of final resort, to be used hesitantly only if all other means of conflict resolution have failed. Christians are called by Jesus and even Paul to be peace-makers, people who aim to resolve all disputes, whether personal or national, by calm, gracious reasoning and by careful negotiation. We need to talk to our enemies with a spirit of reconciliation and even compromise, reaching out to them with constructive and costly actions in order to create an atmosphere of forgiveness. For that is what God did when he took the initiative in sending his Son to die in a rebellious world. Those are surely the Biblical principles by which nations and individuals should comport themselves. Surely they are the principles of divine love.