

IRAQ

Sermon preached at St Edward, king and Martyr, Cambridge At 5.00 o'clock on 23rd March 2003

Many of us have had strong views about this war in Iraq. Last week a group went from this service to a peace vigil. The war in Iraq raises with urgency the question of whether Christians can ever support war. They cannot do so lightly. War is not the Christian way. Jesus, at his arrest and trial, forbade the use of the sword, and he explained that his kingdom was not of this world. Was that stance of Jesus just for that particular situation, or for Christians in all situations? The Kingdom we hope to build is one of peace and justice. Can war be the means?

There may be situations where war is one of unavoidable, but a decision to wage war can't just be a matter of weighing costs and benefits. As war gets more highly technical, there is a danger of thinking about it in a calculating way is chillingly inhuman. The costs of war do not just need to be offset by benefits. The case for war has to be answerable.

There is a moral case for this war in Iraq. I am not sure that the case is overwhelmingly strong, and I am not sure that the war is being fought for moral reasons. But there is a moral case. Andrew White, who probably knows Iraq better than anyone else in Britain, says that its Saddam is no danger to the West but a real danger to his own people. There is a moral case for the war, even though it is a matter of judgment whether that case is strong enough to justify the war. I am not sure whether the people of Iraq, if they had the kind of free vote that they never do have, would have voted to be relieved of their present regime by the military forces of America and Britain. There is not yet much evidence of jubilation at their liberation.

What war can accomplish in Iraq is limited. There will be much to do afterwards, and not just reconstruction of the economy. There is a danger of Iraq disintegrating into warring factions. A free, united, prosperous, democratic Iraq is not just round the corner. As always, building peace will be much harder than winning the war. In addition to the work in Iraq, there will be much work to be done to rebuild international law and the consensus on which it has to be based. There is also much to be done to improve relations between Muslims and Christians. Given the scale of what needs to be, it is clear that war will not take us very far.

We must remember what has been unleashed. Most of us have seen on television the weapons of destruction. They may be precisely targeted, but the bombing is of overwhelming force. Physical destruction on this scale is shocking, and ought to be shocking.

There is the danger of war been reduced to TV entertainment. Maybe TV coverage moderates the worst excesses of war, but the impact on the TV watchers of the world of such massive physical destruction cannot be good. We must not just shrug our shoulders and think 'well that his life'. Even for those who think the moral case for this war is very strong, the physical destruction is appalling, and should remain appalling.

And it is not only physical destruction that is unleashed in war. There is loss of the lives of innocent people, as there was a slaughter of the innocents when Jesus was born. Eventually, Jesus himself, the supreme innocent, was slaughtered too.

Dangerous emotions are being unleashed in Iraq too. The fear, grief and anger that this war is unleashing among the Iraqis will not subside quickly. The emotional cost is, in its way, as high as the cost of physical destruction. And there is a fowling of the spiritual environment. How can the fruits of the spirit flourish under such circumstances: love, joy and peace? How?

The consequences of this war are psychological and spiritual as much as physical and tangible. There is a great dark cloud of fear, anger and grief rising over the spiritual atmosphere in Iraq, which is as disturbing as the visible dark cloud that will go up from bombed buildings and burning oil wells.

As Christians, people who take the spiritual side of life seriously, the spiritual consequences of war are very much our concern. There is a spiritual battle to be joined, and much spiritual work to be done. We can't be in Iraq ourselves, but the spiritual work that needs to be done can be done anywhere. It can be done here and now in this service. It needs to be done in the presence of God, united with God. How else it would it be done?

This must all cause God great anguish. Some people say that God doesn't feel anything, that he is beyond all changes. I don't believe it. It may be true of the God of philosophers, but not of the one true God, the God, as Pascal put it, of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God whose son suffered a cruel death.. How could he not feel anything?

You probably know the story from a Nazi concentration camp where prisoners were watching a child twisting to his death on a gallows. One prisoner asked 'where is God now? His neighbour said, 'he is here, he is twisting on the gallows'. Where is God in his war in Iraq? He is present in it, sharing the anguish.

He is present, carrying the burden, sharing the anguish, sharing the fear and grief. He is absorbing it, containing it, working for some kind of resurrection out of it, working to rebuild spiritually out of all this destruction.

Let us not leave him to carry the burden alone. Let us carry this spiritual burden with him, and neither glorying in war, nor being eaten up with anger about it, but sharing the burden with him, united with his heart of love and goodness.

So, let us join the spiritual battle for Iraq, so that, against all the odds, and through God's goodness, the fruits of the spirit, love, joy and peace, will flourish again in Iraq, and throughout out the earth.

Fraser Watts