

Life of the Spirit

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THE MORALITY OF WAR¹

BY

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You shall hear of wars, and rumours of wars. See that you be not troubled. For these things must come to pass: but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there shall be pestilences, and famine, and earthquakes in places. . . . And because iniquity hath abounded, the charity of many shall grow cold. But he that shall persevere to the end, shall be saved.—Matt. 24, 6-13.



WHEN your chaplain asked me whether I should like to talk to you on the morality of war, I had to tell him that there was nothing I should like to talk about less. I can think of no less cosy subject for a Sunday morning chat in this year of grace 1949.

The trouble, of course, is not just that it is such a complex moral issue in the abstract, but rather because war is so real, so imminent, so possible, so probable.

I suppose it is true, in fact it is a platitude, to say that the shadow of war has fallen on no generation in the history of mankind so heavily as on ours, and perhaps even more on yours than on mine.

It is not merely that we have only just emerged from World War II and that the smoke of it has not yet cleared sufficiently for us to see what havoc it has wrought; already we are in the thick of the 'cold' phase of World War III. No one of us dare assert that it will not develop into a shooting war, and we have some idea of the sort of missiles that are likely to be shot. No one of us dare rely on the uneasy balance of power which is still keeping it 'cold'. No one of us dare say that it is even likely that the mounting stock of atom bombs, rockets, bacilli, supersonic bombers, and all sorts of other weapons which are being only whispered about, will never be used. And quite apart from Communism and mounting tension between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A., there are experts who tell us that

¹ An abstract of an address given at the Oxford University Catholic Chaplaincy, Trinity Sunday, 1949.

the growing power of the teeming nations of Asia, and the narrowing margin between the potentialities of world food production and world population must force the Western world into a bitter war for survival before very long.

I do not know what reliance is to be attributed to these prognostications, but what is quite certain is that war is the destiny of every single one of us here today. If not actual war, then at least rumours of war, the thought, the prospect, of war is somewhere lurking at the back of the minds of each one of us: threatening all our plans, all our schemes for ourselves and for our world, our schemes for a career, for a family; all our longing for security and settlement. Perhaps we think it wise not to think about it; we must get on with life and put away such upsetting, perhaps rather morbid, thoughts. And perhaps we *are* wise. We feel that there is nothing we can do about it. And perhaps the very worst thing about rumours of modern war is our feeling of utter helplessness. We feel that we are robots at the mercy of powers beyond our control, pawns of politicians at Green Tables in whom we can feel very little confidence, or perhaps of ruthless economic laws in which we can feel still less. What, we ask, is the use of talking about the morality of war? Morality belongs only to the sphere of free agents—and here precisely we are not free. The alternative of war or no war does not depend on us. We do not want it; perhaps nobody wants it. If anybody does—preach to *them* about it, in the Kremlin or the State Department or the Foreign Office *if* that is where they can be found. But as well talk to *us* about the morality of plague or earthquake.

Can we dispose of the problem quite so easily as that? I think we cannot, and for two reasons. In the first place we must remember that moral freedom is not the same as power. I may be powerless to stop an earthquake, but I am still free concerning what I do about that earthquake—what I make *of* that earthquake. I am free perhaps to make of the earthquake an occasion of charity and mercy, humility and repentance—or an occasion of cowardice and selfishness, perhaps of commercial exploitation of the victims. Even if the earthquake has incapacitated me physically, I may still be free to make what it has done to me personally an occasion of salvation or damnation by my own inner attitude. I can accept it from the hand of God, or I can curse both it and God.

In the second place a war, even a modern war, is not quite the same as an earthquake. War is never something that just happens to man, it is something that man makes—and progressively improves. The atom-bomb is not only something that may be dropped

near me, it is something I may be required to drop, or to help make for somebody else to drop, or I may just be required to do something or make something which will help somebody to drop it. And to that I can say Yes or No.

Now what is the answer to that question? Is it Yes or is it No? In all humility I must tell you that I do not know. If I did I would tell you. I don't think anybody is going to tell you. I think each one of you is going to have to find his own answer for himself, and take the responsibility and pay the price for his own answer, be it Yes or No. In either case the price is likely to be high.

But have we no principles to guide us in all this? Should we as human beings and as Christians have no viewpoint about war, no attitude to war?

Let me repeat: war, or at least the rumour of war, is our destiny, it is here and now in our minds: it is something not merely being talked about at Green Tables at Paris or Lake Success, or something which can be put off till tomorrow. It is here and now. What are we to do with it? It is part of our lives, just because it is in our minds a living threat to our lives and our plans for life. We cannot evade it without evading life itself.

Leaving modern war aside for a moment, we should recall that conflict is always present in our world: it is endemic in nature—even in human nature, at least fallen human nature. Nature lives on death, on violence and destruction. If we repudiate that, we repudiate nature; and in repudiating nature, we repudiate God, the God of nature. We are also repudiating the God of the Scriptures who found the world he had made very good, if we say that we find a world existing on destruction very bad.

First, then, we must rid ourselves of the idea that conflict, force, violence, destruction and death are inherently and wholly evil—an evil from which no good can come, something which is wholly of the devil and utterly opposed to God. Behind a great deal of what is called pacifism today lies a subtle kind of manicheism: a belief that even if all matter is not evil, and that it is no work or manifestation of God, then force and violence are such. For that reason I should like to say incidentally that I think it is rather a pity when Catholics call themselves pacifists, whatever may be their convictions about the special question of the morality of serving in modern war. As used today, the word is at least ambiguous and confusing, and used by Catholics of themselves, it all too easily lays them open to the suspicion of holding a philosophy contrary to the first article of their creed: belief in one good God maker of all things visible and invisible; a God of power and

might who brings life from death and destruction, who is manifested to us no less in the Lion than in the Lamb.

All this only gives us a background to our thinking on the subject, but it is an important background. We may strongly disapprove of 'Nature red in tooth and claw', but that is how God made it—perhaps the only way he could make it—and if we disapprove, that may mean not that there is something wrong with God, but that there is something wrong with us, at least with our idea of God.

But what of man? What of man's participation in the destructiveness of nature? What of war?

Man is part of nature—not something wholly apart from and above nature. Man is an animal, and a carnivorous animal who usually lives on the death of other animals, and sometimes can survive only by killing other men. Civilisation somewhat obscures but does not change that fundamental fact. As T. S. Eliot has it

Men! Polish your teeth on rising and retiring;

Women! Polish your fingernails;

You polish the tooth of the dog and the talon of the cat.

For man is also—or tries to be, and is called to be—a rational and responsible animal. He too has power, force, violence—and a great deal of cunning. He is called, not to leave all these unused, but to use them rationally and responsibly; and indeed as a responsible and conscious instrument of the Almighty and All-wise.

In the Old Testament we read how this is gradually unfolded to him. God is first revealed as the Lord of Hosts and Armies. His people are taught to fight to fulfil the divine purpose for them. War is one of the ways in which God acts in history and which manifests his power. All war, even sinful war, is a means for the fulfilment of the divine purpose. This is a fact we can never overlook. We need not ask whether, had Nazi Germany won the last war or had we not resisted it, we should be here at all to talk about these things freely today. We need only recall that had not the Children of Israel fought some uncommonly cruel and unsporting wars, and at the behest of their God, they would not have survived, and Christ, the Prince of Peace, would never have come from their stock. There could be no New Testament without the Old, and no Old without war.²

But, to cut a long story short, what of the New Testament? Jesus Christ comes as the King of Love, the Prince of Peace. His coming is heralded by the angels' promise of peace to men of good will, but also by man's massacre of the innocents. He proclaims the

² Further to this, see the author's 'Wars and Rumours of Wars', BLACKFRIARS, June, 1939, pp. 401 ff.

Gospel of Love and Mercy and Forgiveness, but he says that his coming brings not peace but a sword which will divide families and peoples. And so it has done. Wars were at least milder on the whole before Christianity. If Christ does not come, there is no Antichrist. If there is no Christ, there is no Christian civilisation or Christian values to inspire people to fight for them. He himself has no illusions as to what is coming to his followers. He proclaims the bliss of the peace-maker, he proclaims how, if men accept the Gospel, the reign of God, they will turn the other cheek, and turn swords into ploughs. But he knows that they will not do any of these things. 'You will hear of wars and rumours of wars . . . these things *must* come to pass.' No Nazi, no Marxist with his Force-Theory, no cynic, has ever been more sure of the inevitability of war. He weeps over Jerusalem because she has not known the things that were to her peace. She has not known, but *he* knows with absolute certainty what is coming to her in consequence.

It is a terrible thing when we sentimentalise Christ; when we picture him just to suit our own comfort and security. He is not only the Lamb, he is the Lion; and it is characteristic of the age of Christ that the Lamb and the Lion lie down together. The Lamb does not swallow the Lion. The Apocalypse has a stranger and stronger image to express it; it talks of 'the *wrath* of the *Lamb*'. We have to learn that love and force can be united, that force can and should be loving, and that love sometimes has to be very forceful. We have to learn also that force and hatred can be, and by Christians must be, separated. We must learn also that the love of God and the wrath of God are one. The same divine activity is encountered by one person as love—healing, soothing, encouraging; and by another as purging fire, chastisement, cleansing, purifying—painful, yet known as salutary, as something that will make men of us, perhaps even saints. But something also that may even make brutes of us—or worse, irresponsible automatons. All power comes from God—it is holy. We can submit to it and use it only with fear and reverence, the fear and reverence which it claims as a manifestation of the power of God. The greater the power, the greater the responsibility and the greater the holy fear it should inspire in those who are subject to it, and still more in those who use it. Perhaps it was cynicism, but perhaps there was more wisdom than was recognised, when the explosion of the first atom-bomb in the desert of New Mexico was given the code name of 'Operation Trinity'!

But what menaces us today is not, of course, that man will use power in fear of God, but that he will use it in sheer panic of himself.

There is one, and only one, command from our Lord about war: it is 'See that you be not troubled'. Perhaps there can hardly be a more difficult command, but it goes right to the root of the matter. Never more so perhaps than today, for at bottom it seems true to say that there is one, and only one, cause of modern war—and that is fear, often mutual fear: the fear of encirclement, the fear of starvation, the fear of the destruction of all that makes life livable, and of dear ones, or beloved institutions and values, even of individual psychological freedom; the fear of devastating destructive force itself than which nothing is better calculated to unleash it; and, supremely, the fear of fear itself.

We can seldom cast out fear by an act of will; for a time perhaps we can grit our teeth and ignore the fear that gnaws at us—at individuals and at nations. But only love casts out fear—transforms it. Perhaps there seems to be little enough that we can do to overcome the mountains of fear in the world today, in the Eastern hemisphere or in the Western. It is supremely difficult to cast out in a world where charity has grown so cold. But we Christians are here to show the way whether it is followed or not. We must begin with ourselves. We are here to lead, not to follow. It is the fear in our own hearts and minds we must begin with—the fear, perhaps, of war, the fear of the enemy—be it Russia or Communism or Asia or whatever it is. Communism thrives on war—that is good Marx-Leninism. Communism, as the Vatican newspaper has frequently reminded us lately, can never be destroyed by war. As for the Communists themselves, they are men, our brothers redeemed by the blood of Christ. *The enemy, the destroyer of peace, is fear—the fear in men's hearts, and first of all our own. And what our Lord expects of us in all this is—not to be troubled!*

Now you may be saying, all this is all very well, but a little bit in the air, and neatly evading *the* question about the morality of war:—Should we Christians serve or not serve in the next war? I have already said that I do not know the answer to that question. To the best of my knowledge there is no one answer binding on us all. I do not think that there could be very much profit in discussing with you the old theologians' theory about the 'just war'. With many theologians of today, I believe that the 'just war' as it was defined in the middle ages is as dead as the dodo, and could not possibly happen in our day. I am inclined to think—I put it to you as a purely personal opinion—that such discussions only take our minds from the realities of the present situation. But though I believe that there cannot possibly be in our time a 'just war' as it was understood for example by St Thomas Aquinas, and that there is

nobody in the world today who proposes to start such a war, the fact of force, and *the right and the obligation sometimes to resist force by force* remains. This is not the place to give a theological lecture on that subject; I only want to say that because we have disposed to our own satisfaction of the problem of the 'just war' as irrelevant, we cannot hastily jump to the conclusion that we have to be conscientious objectors. One thing, however, I must add, and upon which all Catholics must be agreed, and that is this: if it is your honest-to-God conviction that to serve in the armed forces at all, or in this or that capacity, would be a mortal sin for you, then you not only may, but you must, obey the voice of your conscience—and you are entitled to the respect of your fellow Catholics for your decision. Similarly, if you believe that justice, charity, obedience, or just the decision of your lawful authorities, require you to serve, then you are similarly obliged, and equally entitled to respect from your fellows. Conscience is not a prerogative of the objector. Either way, only God can rightly judge your heart's intention.

But I wonder very much whether in fact this question is *the* question. I do not believe that before the Judgment Throne of Christ the all-important question will be—What did you do in World War II or III? Were you in the services or were you a civilian? The question will more likely be something like this—Whether in the services, or as a conscientious objector, or a civilian, what did you let the war do to you? Did you let it trouble you, disturb you, or panic you? Did you accept or evade its challenge to your security? Did you let it shake your faith in God? Did you let yourself become so appalled at the abundance of iniquity in the world that you let your own charity become cold? Did you make of it a challenge to your own spiritual life, or did you make of it an excuse to evade your moral life and development as a human being and a Christian? Did you try and see the hand of God in it, and did you grasp or reject that hand? Did you let it put the fear of God in you, or just stark, godless fear? Did you let yourself become an automaton? Did you find in war's threat to your security a reminder that here in time we have no abiding city, but that our home is not in this world, but in the next? Did you love the enemy, whoever or whatever it was, or did you use the war to vent your own spleen outside of you, to escape your own fear? Were you desperately solemn and serious about it all, or did you seize its opportunities to encourage the faint-hearted, cheer the sick, be patient with the boredoms and frustrations that war and rumours of war brought to you? In short—whether in or out of uniform—

were you a Christian, were you Christ-like?

Those, I can hardly doubt, are the sort of questions we are more likely to be asked—the very searching sort of questions we might well begin to ask ourselves now. There can hardly be more challenging questions. What could be more challenging than to have war—modern, mechanised, democratic, atomic, total, mass war—for our destiny?—to be free in the mechanised mass?—to be a person in the midst of impersonality?—to be creative in the midst of destruction?—to keep a mind of one's own in the midst of propaganda?—to keep true in the midst of lies?—to keep one's heart warm in the midst of cold steel and cold calculation?—to keep cool in the heat of passion?—to keep confident in the midst of cynicism?—to be peace-loving in the midst of conflict?—to be Christ-like in the midst of devilry?

We must all know that we cannot answer these questions satisfactorily. Modern war calls for far more than human strength. Therein precisely lies the opportunity which our age possesses in an unprecedented degree. God's strength is made manifest in our weakness. Only in the might and grace of the Almighty Trinity can we get anywhere near becoming what we are called to be. That might and grace are available in prayer, and the sacraments, through the all-powerful prayers of the Queen of Peace. Atomic war is not, as we may be inclined to think, 'the end': 'the end', we are told, 'is not yet'. But the might of the atom can be countered by little less than the almightiness of God, of which it is itself a feeble expression. Wars and rumours of wars mean this at least: Christians must be Christians, or they will be very much less than human. Mediocrity is impossible; escape is impossible. Yet if only a few were to keep and develop their Christian integrity under the challenge of wars and rumours of wars—what could they not do for the world? At all events they have the certain assurance—'He that shall persevere to the end, shall be saved'. Perhaps it is not only they themselves who will be saved.

FROM ST AUGUSTINE

'Misericordia Dei est quia nescit homo quando moriatur. Latet ultimus dies ut observentur omnes dies.' *Sermo XXXIX—1.*

Death, close companion walks with man unseen,
 Never a moment's life but Death is near,
 Never a moment when we need not fear
 The following steps, no pause no space between:

Such is God's mercy, such His Wisdom's way
 Lest we relax our watch and cease to pray.—JOHN SEARLE.