

An Ordinary Christian's Reflections after hearing Arguments on War and Peace

CLARE DAWSON

Dear Lord, I turn to you after hearing many arguments about war, peace, nuclear weapons, non-violence, pacifism, and the duty of Christian persons to take an active interest in governmental policy, or drift, or incapacity to resist events.

Of course it concerns me deeply whether your creation, human and non-human, is destroyed or not; and though to die might be swift as the rending of a curtain that hangs between here and hereafter, I don't want to die with most of the world, my world at any rate, making a funeral pyre.

I can accept it if it is part of your plan, something you mean to allow because out of it you can bring greater good. Must I accept also the ghastly possibility of living while others die, in a barren world, the material expression of spiritual bankruptcy? Yes. I am sure your answer is 'Yes'.

There's no doubt about one thing. You are the Lord, the centre of all that is, the touchstone of human life, not only now but for ever. You cannot be caught unawares, made to surrender control, or alter your purpose of redemption. You are free, undeterred, unhurried, not open to force or harrying, without deviation.

(How then do our prayers effect anything? Is it that what we can only describe as your daring, like founding your Church on a few poor men, the chief of whom betrayed you in your own mortal lifetime, makes the fate of the world depend on our asking, not only in words but by actions? We don't understand these high matters, nor perceive the shift in the balance of spiritual power, the moving of mountains.)

You are the eternal Wisdom, and at the same time your human mind contains the sum of all human wisdom. You are the pure self-existent Reason from which all created reason, and even good sense,

derives; but you are also the one perfectly reasonable man, able to lead us in the paths of reason and peace.

If I look at the problem of war from the standpoint of sheer horse-sense I am bound to reject the idea of nuclear war as nonsense. What is the object of a war in which there can be no victory for anyone, in which all life must be endangered?

If I look at it from the standpoint of religion, reverence demands that your creation should not be destroyed. It is not ours to handle as we like. We are no more than tenants in the world, under contract to hand back to you a property improved, or stand convicted of the awful sin of waste, barrenness, infertility.

But Lord, to whom every mind is an open book, apart from this one core of perception, which comes solely from your gift of faith, the ability to see you as centre, to trust you even in the desolation of spirit that must afflict a human mind at the prospect of utter destruction, what other thoughts do you find in me?

A measure at least of distrust (I hope not cynical) of governments, parties, politics, and especially slogans designed to disguise the truth. Can anyone have much trust in unstable human nature that has in it, from the moment of Adam's fall, a tendency to fratricidal strife which is found in the end to be suicidal? There are, and are felt to be, dark forces in every human soul, urging destruction and destructive acts. Yet, leaving you out of the picture for a moment, though you never were out of it, but always, at all times, its centre, there have been and are good men. There is much good in our rather battered human nature, especially the basic urge to live, to create new life, and conditions where it may flourish. You made that desire very strong, but sometimes it seems as if men have tried to dilute it, being more afraid of the violence of love than the cold death of its absence. (Is that the root of it, Lord, cowardice? Not the noble fear of you, but the paralysing terror that diminishes power to think and act?).

As for the arguments, Lord, they sound a bit tinny to me. Perhaps it's my ear that's not good and certainly I don't deny the need for thought, or the goodness of those who set their minds to defend our right to live, for that's what it comes to now. But the deep strong current of life itself is a more persuasive argument than words, yet no one seems to listen to it. Words seem hollow and brittle compared with blood and bones.

On the other hand, because we are still alive, there is always a danger that anger, your good gift, a power divinely conceived and put into

us to enable us to overcome difficulties, fear, and whatever opposes life, may topple over and carry us with it into the bottomless pit of hate.

Lord, dear but just Lord, love is no easy task. Being yourself a man you know how it is; not that you had in your heart the coiled serpent that betrays again and again the sons and daughters of Adam, for you were born free to love, free to obey, free to fear God alone. It is easy enough for us to talk about love (very angrily) and to recognize that anger may be right, since you were angry. (But if it is right it has to be like your own, one of the faces of love). Part of Adam's penalty which we inherit is lack of balance, to keep us from thinking too highly of ourselves. If our heads swell we become at once top heavy and down we go with a bump. But in the kingdom to which baptism admitted us we have a share of your freedom, given to strengthen the precarious freedom of wills thrown off course so easily, by minds that are muddled and often accept a lie because truth is hard to grasp and not always convenient.

It is impossible for those who know you, Lord, to think of anything apart from you. Without you nothing exists, Word by whom all was made. You are the fount of life, our origin. Adam was made in your likeness, Son of the Father, and every descendant of Adam depends on you, aware or unaware of the cords that bind us to you. You are the true cause of our life, energy, activity of heart and mind, without choice on our part. I am your image, doubly so because you have chosen to be fashioned and born in mine.

What has all this to do with arguments about war and peace and the possibly lawful conditions of killing, defacing creation, breaking not idols but living images of you? In the face of imminent destruction do living men argue or act? Yet argument is a kind of action, and the act that is not based on truth is a bad act.

Is there no danger of minds becoming so fixed on the threat before us that the nature of peace is forgotten? Peace is a habit of mind, an off-shoot of vital charity. It can't come about without love, so there is no escaping the conclusion that everyone, without exception, will help or hinder the peace of the world by the measure of peace in himself. But peace is impossible without order, and human good order comes from obeying you.

Even though we call you Master we have become deaf to your terrible divine voice telling us with the eternal authority of God that we are to love our neighbours as ourselves. We cannot plead inability

to obey because you make obedience possible. It would be impossible without you, if only because it demands heroism and we are so far from heroic, and then the power to love is a great gift but it can be abused. The only love that can never be abused is yours, the love with which you love us, and which you give to us that we may give it back to you by loving our fellow men.

Fear of your commands, if we saw who it is that commands us, might lead us to hide in the bushes like Adam of old, though no bush can hide us from you, for each one of us shares in the guilt of the situation in which we find ourselves today, and you, Truth, condemn us. I can only acknowledge my share in the havoc, the famine, the unbelief, the lonely wretchedness of so many who are persons like myself, like you.

But repentance is not like remorse, it doesn't destroy us. It is clean like a surgeon's knife cutting away what is foul, corrupt, diseased, giving the good a chance to grow and increase. And when you have worked in us the miracle of repentance, when we have come to our senses, admitted our guilt and asked pardon, will you not come in the fullness of undying life to be in us, in our thoughts, our words, our acts? It must be with your mind that we think of our neighbours, your neighbours, argue or listen to arguments. Thinking is very necessary, so that by conscious reason we may choose out a path for ourselves and for others, since no man is able to walk alone, isolated, neither affecting nor affected by others.

Your command to love is stringent, but that does not rule out the duty of some to speak for you, using the equipment you gave, which is simply human reason, not exempt from its task because it is raised by faith to penetrate beyond the sphere of reason. Others, perhaps I am among them, must be still and suffer hopefully, learning to love.

Something comes of love. It is fruitful, daring, live, forceful, creative. Only deliver us, dear Lord, from romanticizing about it. Make us realistic enough to perceive that it demands constant effort, readiness to adjust our ideas, to let our feelings be trampled on, not clinging to pride but accepting all the hardships that go with acquiring a new discipline.

Everyone wants to receive love (even if they call it justice) and it knows how to offer itself tactfully, as if to be received were the only honour it sought. In its train comes a justice that is friendly and decent, not cold and harsh like some human justice that seems more allied to hate than to love.

Loving is a great deal more than feeling pleasantly disposed towards others, and the two don't always go together, not, anyway, in commonplace sinners like us, Lord; not in such given-to-irritability folk as we are, eager, then swiftly impatient when our clumsy advances fail, and inclined to retire in disgust. (Only there is no longer any place to which we may retire, for the whole structure of the world is in peril.) Perhaps it is different with saints. Perhaps your living presence in them, which they do not perpetually slay, gets into their feelings as well as their minds.

But you didn't tell us to love with our minds alone and real love seems to require lust for life, frankly desiring to live and let others live too. A godly lust for living would make us the enemies of all destruction, but quickened by faith it would also enable us to see that destruction, if it should come, is only the working out in time of the eternal opposition between is and is-not, between He-who-is and whatever attempts to undo his work of creation.

Let your cross be to us again the sign not of failure but victory, the triumph of life and goodness over chaos and death. You are the centre, Lord. In your resurrection, without which the cross has no meaning, the whole creation is new, re-born, re-created. You are the final Word to the nations that walk in the darkness. To us and to them you say: I am arisen and still with you, I, the unending Life, the destroyer of death, I conquer and reign.