

Where is God in War? Sermon 26th October 2014

Reading: James 4:1-12 Submit Yourselves to God

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.

³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble."

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

¹¹ Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbour?

Introduction

This morning I want to deal with a controversial topic - Where is God in War?

- It arose last week
- We were discussing where God could be found in different aspects of life.
- And one group asked about this so it seemed appropriate to discuss it this morning
- Especially considering it is the commemoration of the 100 year anniversary of the Great War

However we need to begin by accepting this is a big question

- Many people will have different opinions
- It also gives rise to many other questions.
- Questions about whether it is ok for Christians to fight in a war.
- Is there such a thing as a holy war?
- How could a loving God command those horrible events described in the Old Testament?

I wanted to begin with this passage from James for three reasons

- Firstly to establish that war arises from sin.
- At the root of every conflict from a petty squabble to major international conflicts is man's rejection of God
- That doesn't necessarily mean all who fight in war are sinful
- But we can be clear that the origin of every conflict is sin
- Selfishness, greed, pride lead to the desire for power
- Desire for power leads to abuse
- Which on a national or tribal scale ultimately leads to warfare.

Secondly, the answer to sin, and therefore war, is repentance and submission to God

- There may be questions here about God's commands to the Israelites to fight
- But ultimately God does not desire war
- He desires we live in obedience to Him
- And if we did – there would be no war

Finally, and very importantly, (vs. 11 -12)

- It is not our position to judge one another
- By judge we do not mean weigh up the facts to determine what is right
- We are, of course, supposed to do that.
- This is about condemning someone who thinks differently to us.
- Or slandering them by saying they are not Christian or a coward or a murderer.

I remember when I was a student, going to a Baptist church in Liverpool.

- The Pastor was a very well respected theologian
- On one occasion he argued there was such a thing as a just war.
- One of the congregation took exception to that teaching
- And for several weeks afterwards he spent Sunday mornings standing outside the church
- Wearing a placard emblazoned with the words
- 'This church teaches murder'

This is the kind of slander and judgement James is saying is wrong

- And is usurping God's position as Judge of men's character.
- The point is that where we disagree we must be respectful that others may have honest opinions
- And they also equally desire to serve God.

This has been discussed for generations

- We need to accept we will not be able to find the definitive answer to this question
- But we must remain humble and loving to those who come to different conclusions

Now before we deal with the main question - Where is God in war?

- I think we need to look at some of the associated issues
- Particularly the biblical understanding of war
- And whether it is ever justified for Christians to fight in war.

The Biblical Understanding of War

The Bible is primarily intended to be a revelation of God

- And a sharing of men and women's experience of Him.
- It is not a rule book and as such does not necessarily directly answer these moral questions.
- I believe, that God intentionally leaves these questions unclear.
- Thoughtless adherence to rules seldom leads to real righteousness.
- Take the Pharisees for example

God wants us to think things through,

- He wants us to grasp the principles and wrestle with their application
- To consider the competing demands of justice and mercy
- As He said through the Prophet Micah (Micah 6:8)

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

So what are the different Christian understandings of war?

- I think, broadly speaking there are three camps
 1. Holy War
 2. Just War
 3. Pacifism

Holy War

We find this in the Old Testament

- Particularly in the conquest of the promised land
- In this case God was actively fighting for his chosen people
- And He set out laws about how they should fight notably in Deuteronomy 20

When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you. ² When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. ³ He shall say: "Hear, Israel: Today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them. ⁴ For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory." (vs. 1-4)

In most cases God tells them to seek first for peace and only fight if they have to (vs.10)

- However the conquest of the Promised land was a unique case (vs 16-18)
However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. ¹⁷ Completely destroy them... ..as the LORD your God has commanded you. ¹⁸ Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.

God is sovereign judge over his creation

- The people in the land of Canaan were awful.
- They engaged in every evil and perversion
- In particular God singled out their ritual child abuse and sacrifice.
- Before Jesus the only way to deal with this sin is death.

This is still true in the New Testament

- Paul tells the Romans (Romans 6:23)
"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So, in other words the only solution to sin is to exterminate it.

- In the conquest of Canaan this was done literally
- Although even then there was room for repentance.

Think of Rahab who was saved from Jericho

- Married an Israelite called Salmon
- And was great, great, great Grandmother of King David
- And thus eventually Jesus.

But now God's final solution to sin has been revealed

- It is through Jesus' death sin has been conquered
- Our fight is no longer with the sword
- As Jesus confirmed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26 51-52)

"With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.""

Paul confirms this understanding in his letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 6: 10-12)

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"

So my conclusion is that a Holy War is not compatible with biblical teaching.

- If anything the sense of moral superiority leads to sickening levels of violence
- That rejoices in the death of an enemy
- As epitomised by the crusades which were as brutal as the Jihad we condemn today.

Just War

This is more pragmatic

- It is the idea that war is bad but can be justified as being the lesser of two evils
- So to protect the innocent, defend against aggression or to establish peace.
- Just war philosophy is associated with ideas of just ways of fighting
- As epitomised by the Geneva Convention

This understanding does not originate from Christian doctrine

- But is generally the traditional stance of the church.
- It is accepted that war is inevitable in a sinful world
- And the Laws in Deuteronomy are understood to be God's provision for that.
- So drawn into war we should attempt to behave in as Godly a way as possible.
- Not with hate but love for our enemy
- Nor by abusing your power

John the Baptist told the crowds to "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance". (Luke 3:8)

- Some soldiers asked him, "What should we do?" (vs. 13)
- He didn't tell them to leave the army but replied,
"Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

However there are a number of problems with this stance

- Notably, who is to judge whether the war is just
- It seems inevitable that in conflict both sides claim to be justified in their actions.
- Just like in a holy war with both sides claiming God's blessing.
- Today we nominally accept the United Nation as arbiter of what is just.

In addition, we have to differentiate between personal and state action

- So a personal, or small group vendetta is a crime
- And killing is called murder.
- However if sanctioned by the state it is not a crime.

This is not as illogical as it may sound.

- We readily accept the legality of the police to use force to prevent crime
- And of the law courts to punish and imprison a criminal.
- Yet if we were to take matters into our own hands that would be wrong
- And result in Gang warfare and the like.

In this argument there is more biblical support

- Clearly there is a contradiction between the commandment not to kill and what we have read about war If there is no differentiation between war and personal conduct
- This is accepted by Paul in his letter to Romans 13:1,2, 4 -5
“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.⁴ For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.”

Pacifism

Finally we have the pacifist stance.

- This argues we cannot do for the state what is immoral or ungodly for us to do?
- The Bible says ‘Thou shalt not kill’ (Exodus 20:13)
- Jesus told us to love our enemies and in the Sermon on the Mount he says (Matt 5:38-39)
“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”

Therefore if there is no differentiation between the state and individual in application of God’ law.

- Then it is always wrong to fight and war is always wrong
- The problem here is the challenge to protect those in your care
- The pacifist would answer this with non-violent protest
- Such as practised by Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement.

Conclusion

Obviously this is a huge simplification of the arguments

- But hopefully gives a overview of the spectrum of opinions
- But what are we to conclude is the Christian response to war?

We have discounted the idea of Holy War as only being applicable to the claiming of the Promised Land.

- There is no biblical evidence for extending it beyond this occasion.

The Just war accepts the challenge of trying to serve God in a broken world

- Whereas pacifism refuses to compromise on Jesus' teaching in any circumstance.
- Personally I can find room for both stances.
- On the one hand Christians need to be in the world serving the broken and damaged
- On the other we need to be a prophetic voice proclaiming righteousness and justice.

Certainly there are examples of Godly men and women from both stances

- Soldiers who witness to God's love and guidance in the execution of their duties
- And Pacifists who find his comfort and encouragement even when faced by persecution and imprisonment for their beliefs.

Finally, the initial question

Where is God in War?

In a way the answer to this is simple.

- Jesus came into a sinful world to redeem and save it
- He expressed his mission in the synagogue from the words of Isaiah 66
"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke4:18)

In war Jesus is doing what he always does

- Working for the Kingdom of God
- Working to bring healing and forgiveness
- Setting the captives free.

That is why I showed that little film about Woodbine Willie

- Because the question the soldier asked in NO Man's Land
- What is the church doing out here?
- His answer was "It's Job"
- In the same way Where is God in War
- Right there in the midst of it –doing his work.

I want to share some words from John Lennox

- The Christian Apologetic famous for his refutation of Richard Dawkins Atheism
- In his book 'Gunning for God' he tells of an experience at a Holocaust memorial.
- He had met a Jewish Lady and she challenged him
- Standing in front of photographs of the horrific experiments done on children by Dr Mengele
- *What does your religion make of this?*

He writes

“She spoke loudly enough for several others to pause and look in our direction. What was I to say? What could I say? She had lost her parents and many relatives in the Holocaust. I had young children at the time and could scarcely bear to look at the Mengele photographs, because of the sheer horror of imagining my children suffering such a fate. I had nothing in my experience or my family history that was remotely parallel to the horror that her family had endured.

But still she stood in the doorway waiting for an answer. This is what I eventually said: “I would not insult you your memory of your parents by offering you simplistic answers to your question. What is more, I have young children and I cannot even bear to think of how I might react if anything were to happen to them, even if it were far short of the evil that Mengele did. I have no easy answers; but I do have what, for me at least is the doorway into and answer.”

“What is it “She said

“You know I am a Christian. That means - and I know it is difficult for you to follow me here-that I believe that he was God incarnate, come into the world as saviour, which is what his name ‘Yeshua’ means. Now I know that is difficult for you to accept. Nevertheless just think about this question – If Yeshua was really God, as I believe he was. What was God doing on a cross?”

“Could it be that God begins just here to meet our heartbreaks, by demonstrating that he did not remain distant from our human suffering, but became part of it himself? For me, this is the beginning of hope; and it is a living hope that cannot be smashed by the enemy of death. The story does not end in the darkness of the cross. Yeshua conquered death. He rose from the dead; and one day, as the final judge, he will assess everything in absolute fairness, righteousness and mercy.”

There was silence. She was still standing, arms outstretched, forming a motionless cross in the doorway. After a moment, with tears in her eyes, very quietly but audibly she said: “Why has no one ever told me that about my messiah before?”

Maybe this is the beginning of your answer

- Where is God in war?
- Right there in the midst of it dying for its sin and futility,
- Where is God?
- Risen from the dead to bring hope and salvation
- And ultimate victory over death itself.

In the words of the Prophet Isaiah (9:5-7

⁵*Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.*

⁶*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷*Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*

Amen