

## War vs Peace

For too long, the inhabitants of a Middle Eastern city have lived under occupation, oppression, and dehumanisation. And after years of economic exploitation and humiliation, rebellions spilled over into a wild act of terrorism that would prove suicidal for the people as a whole. The occupying army, was momentarily humiliated – so it was inevitable that they would come back in greater numbers. And soon after, that is precisely what happened: a massive military force descended onto the city, and cut off its supply lines. The inhabitants were subjected to mass starvation, and – if reports are to be believed – they resorted to eating the leather of their own shoes, and eventually, sheer desperation led them to eating each other.

The besieging army had long since begun an ethnic cleansing operation: It goes into the city, slaughters the populace, deports many of the survivors, and reduces its architecture and infrastructure to smoke and ash and rubble. Now, you've seen it on your screens: dust and flame and concrete, victims howling, screaming, grieving. But I am talking, of course, about the Jewish rebellion against the Roman empire in the first century – that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem, and of its precious Temple.

And it is from within the metaphorical rubble of the fallen Temple that today's reading, Luke's Gospel, was written. The Gospels are the first four books of the Christian Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And they recount the build-up to the execution of a dangerous dissident, Jesus of Nazareth.

Whatever else Jesus of Nazareth might have been, he was a prophet in the great Hebrew tradition, and as a prophet – he saw this disaster a generation before. Because the fall of Jerusalem was a disaster – it was the end of the Temple, the end of Mosaic Judaism. And to any prophet, this was utterly foreseeable. But let's be clear – the prophets would see into the future not by supernatural means, but by thoroughly, and disgustingly, and gut-wrenching frustratingly – natural means.

So, the reading recounts how Jesus came to Jerusalem, the holy city, the joy of the whole earth. And he is hit by a flood of emotion because he can foresee the sheer tragedy of its fate. The Israel of Jesus' day was a vassal state of the Roman empire – an empire whose economic machinery bled the milk and honey from the land, to fill foreign tables and foreign purses.

So how might members of the 'chosen nation' deal with their subjugation to a dehumanising pagan superpower – a power that was draining the lifeblood from the land. As a Rabbi said to me a few weeks ago, 'Two Jews, three opinions.' And in first century Jerusalem, opinions and commitments ranged from collaboration with the Romans at one end, to outright nationalistic rebellion at the other. And in the end, it was the militant nationalists who got their own way – and Jesus could see it coming.

But Jesus' own strategy for dealing with occupation did not fit neatly anywhere on the spectrum. He counselled love for enemies (which sounded like collaboration), and he counselled forgiveness of debt (in a world where debts had to be honoured). Through all this, he advocated a peaceful revolution. And – in his own day, that peaceful revolution was rejected.

Now – I think it was John F. Kennedy who said that *those who make peaceful revolution impossible, make violent revolution inevitable*. And that is precisely what we are seeing in our own day. It takes no prophetic insight to see the inevitability of forthcoming war – and the causes are largely the same as in Jesus' day.

I belong to a Church tradition that, although not universally anti-capitalist, is highly critical of unregulated capitalism. And this is largely because of its core belief structure – which often remains largely unexamined. So, at the foundation of neoliberal capitalism, is unwitting

commitment to growth. That you measure the health of a nation, or an institution, or even a person, by its economic growth – as though this were the ultimate, timeless measure. Growth. But you cannot have infinite growth on a finite planet.

Let me say that again. You cannot have infinite growth on a finite planet. Because sooner or later you will run out of resources. And when you run out of resources for you, where do you get the resources you need for your growth? Why, by taking other people's. And firstly, you do this with your own people (through privatising public assets, cutting welfare support, and deregulating businesses that exploit people). And when you have exploited your own people as much as you can, what do you do? How do you continue your rampage of infinite growth? Where do you get your resources? Why, you take other people's.

But of course, we are not Genghis Khan. We are civilised western nations. And that means that we have to invent valid reasons why it's okay to invade and exploit other people's resources, and we do it through complex economic mechanisms to hide the fact that this is what we are doing! Of course, I am skating over nuance, and need to add footnotes – but this view is not unique to my church tradition.

For the last decade, hope has gathered around political figures who spelt all of this out, gained massive following, particularly in the UK and America. And what happened to them? Hatchet jobs by those whose ambitions came under threat – implanted into the unreflective punditry of liberal intelligentsia via legacy media outlets. After all – We want order not chaos. There is no alternative. And nobody wants a revolution. But ... *those who make peaceful revolution impossible, make violent revolution inevitable.*

But it's not only those hate-filled radical leftists who make this argument. I have heard, entirely unprovoked, precisely the same logic advanced by senior military officers, serving in both British and American militaries. About a year ago, before the election of Trump, I found myself in conversation with the second in command of the British Army, who said that NATO will be at full scale war by 2027, for precisely these reasons. And this general was echoing the doom and gloom predictions offered by Jesus of Nazareth.

We all know, that Jesus' own attempts to spark a peaceful revolution had failed, and so he saw the inevitable outcome: the destruction of Jerusalem! That was today's reading – the frustration that Jesus felt because the people of God did not realise the hour of their visitation, and would not recognise, 'the things that make for peace'. What are those things?

The 'things that make for peace', though not explicitly spelled out, presumably refer to Israel's faithful obedience to the Law and the Prophets – the beating heart of worship that is not confined to ritual, but pumps its lifeblood right through the social, political, and economic structures of the nation. This is borne out in our first reading today, from the Prophet Jeremiah: that throughout the Torah and prophetic tradition, peace refers to the flourishing of a just society, one that prioritizes the most vulnerable: widows, orphans, the poor, and the stranger (Exod. 22:21-24; Deut. 10:18; Isa. 1:17). This vision of peace requires that power is wielded not for domination but for justice, wealth is not hoarded by those at the top of the economic tree, but shared fairly, and worship of God is expressed through concrete acts of mercy and justice (Mic. 6:8; Jer. 22:3).

It's easy to look at all this, and think – ha, that's mind-bendingly obvious – stupid iron age idiots, religious fruitcakes, nasty war-loving violence-mongers. But really – Jesus was initiating a peaceful revolution, and most comfortable people don't want revolution – they want order. The survival of the status quo that works for them – and does not confront them with the people for whom that same status quo creates growing misery. And so groweth the conviction that, despite its regrettable imperfections, there is no alternative to our current, sensible order, that works well enough for me and people like me. And so the hunger and thirst for order eclipses the hunger and

thirst for justice. And peaceful revolution spells disorder. But *those who make peaceful revolution impossible, often unwittingly make violent revolution inevitable.*

No. Easier to believe there is no alternative. Easier to stick with what we know – much more realistic than revolution. Much easier to carry on banging our head against a brick wall in the hope something will be different next time. Why does Emmanuel Macron come to mind? Or the latest Middle Eastern peace treaty? Or General Melchett?: “Doing precisely what we have done eighteen times before is exactly the last thing they’ll expect us to do this time!” Rinse, spin, repeat. And as well intentioned as they might be, *those who make peaceful revolution impossible, often unwittingly make violent revolution inevitable.*

What we do about this inevitability, what a biblical response might be, and what a prophetic worldview might reveal about what is to come – these will be the questions we address this term.

## Intercession

We think of those who have lost what we could not face to lose. Who face horrors we can barely imagine,

We think of those who queue for food and water and shelter. We think of those lined up at border crossings.

We think of those separated from loved ones. Not knowing if, and when they might see them again. We think of those who could not get out. Of those now without home.

We think of those who last week had never heard a bomb explode, and have now become desensitized. Of those who have seen parts of their neighbourhood where once they visited shops and talked in the street, reduced now to rubble.

We think of those who found themselves with a gun in their hands for the first time. Who have learned the smell of oil and sulphur, and the kickback of a rifle, while tanks queue to enter their cities. We think of those with No shelter. No toilet. No prospect of when this will end. No sense of a solution.

We think of those with the power to change these dreadful circumstances.

We are made aware of the disgusting finitude of our mortality, the time-stopping horror of human vulnerability.

That hideously insignificant nano-fragment of time in which the life we live comes and then just goes.

We ask if our life, if all lives, are worth something after all.

And if all lives are worth something, then naturally we long for all lives to be valued. For people of all nations to be valued. And so we long for peace. Real, and political, and hard won peace.

Where there has been the rumble of tanks, the droning of helicopters, the booms of explosions, the snap of gunfire.

Peace, where there has been chaos.

Peace where there has been war.

Peace for the people of Ukraine, of Sudan, of Yemen and Syria.

Peace that endures the latest in a tradition of failed ceasefires.

May we be compelled to use whatever resources have been

entrusted to us, to help bring about peace.