

## **Message for March 13, 2022**

### **Lent 2**

#### **Matthew 5:38-48**

One evening during the past week I was watching the evening news and, not surprisingly, it focused on the war in Ukraine. Most of the stories focused on the plight of the more than two million refugees who have fled to Poland and elsewhere for safety. Being curious, I switched over to one of the American stations to see how they were covering the story. Like our Canadian stations, their focus was also on the war, but their reports were somewhat different. Their coverage focused more on the actual fighting and reports of Russian atrocities which included a picture of an entire family killed by the Russians.

I have to be honest and admit that I got angry as I watched the news and muttered some very un-Christian comments to the effect that wouldn't it be good if Putin got a taste of his own medicine. My comments were very un-Christian to be sure but later they made me think about just how we as Christians should respond to what is happening in Ukraine right now. Indeed how should we respond to any war or armed conflict?

In a way this isn't a hard question to answer and in fact we already know the answer. All we have to do is read the Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain:

“You have heard it said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’”

Following the teaching and example of Jesus, the Christian response to war and violence appears to be very straight-forward; war and violence are not a morally acceptable option, even when we are the victims. But this of course isn't what we want to hear is it? I am reminded of the episode I shared with you a couple of weeks ago when I mentioned an elder's response to Jesus' teaching that we must turn the other cheek and love our enemies. The elder, whose task it was to offer up a prayer in response to the sermon, simply said, “Lord, we heard your word today and we don't like it”.

If we are honest about it, we may well decide that we really don't like God's word in today's scripture passage either. And because we may not like it, we may well be tempted to dismiss it as being totally unrealistic and reason that we are free to ignore it since no one can ever possibly live like this. That however would not be true because the earliest Christians did.

In the earliest days of our faith, the Christians did their best to live according to today's lesson. They were what we would call pacifists and as such they refused to join the army. Their refusal to serve and fight however enraged the authorities and helps explain why the authorities hated and persecuted the Christians. Then, when Constantine the Great made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, things changed overnight. The Christians could no longer depend upon others to fight and protect them from the invading barbarians. Like everyone else, the Christians too now had to fight. This was their reality but even so, the tension remained between Jesus' teaching and life 'in the real world' where war was a fact of life.

In an effort to try and resolve the tension, St. Adoman of Iona proposed that if a war was unavoidable, then those fighting had to do their best to spare the women, children and clergy. Centuries later this led to the famed "Truce of God". According to it, a war could only be fought if the cause was just and all efforts to resolve the differences had failed. In addition, all parties at war had to do their best to keep the civilians and their property safe. It was also decreed that war could not be waged during the weeks leading up to Christmas or the weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter. In addition, battles couldn't be fought on Sundays either. This was a real effort to try and at least control war, if not eliminate it altogether, but it was doomed to fail. Instead, as we entered the Modern Age, wars grew in their intensity and ferocity until we got to the point where we are today; total war where civilians are thought to be legitimate targets. Indeed all we have to do is look at what is happening in Ukraine right now with hospitals being shelled, numerous civilians dead and injured, and more than two million people now homeless refugees. But even so, the 'Just War Theory' is still as if it were, the 'official' Christian position when it comes to war. If the cause is just, non-combatants are spared, and casualties are kept to a minimum, then war is a morally acceptable option. Not surprisingly though, not everyone agrees with this and insist that we must get back to the teaching of Jesus.

His name might not be familiar to most of us but George MacLeod, who was the founder of the Iona Community, is one of the most controversial figures in modern Presbyterian history. MacLeod was born into a wealthy aristocratic Scottish family in 1895. He served as an officer in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders during the First World War and was decorated for bravery. After the war he went into the ministry and after ministering in some very wealthy congregations, he chose to minister in the slums of Glasgow. He was a noted preacher and became quite famous. He even had his own radio show where he preached a sermon every week. Then the Second World War broke out and MacLeod announced that he was a pacifist and totally against the war. His popularity nose-dived and he lost his radio show. He was also jeered at and said to be a coward, though that really wasn't fair as proven by his military service in the previous war. But what did MacLeod propose instead of fighting? Inspired by such as today's scripture passage, he called for passive, non-violent resistance.

Passive non-violent resistance also inspired Mahatma Gandhi in his quest for India's independence from Great Britain. This also inspired Martin Luther King Jr. and the American civil rights movement. Don't resort to violence in the face of violence and oppression; instead turn the other cheek, love your enemies, and pray for them. And in the case of both India and the United States, it worked too. While there was some violence, the British government was unwilling to use unlimited brutal force against peaceful protesters and so India gained its independence. While there was some violence in the United States as well, generally speaking, the authorities were reluctant to use brutal force against those marching for racial equality and civil rights. In both of these instances the way of Jesus worked, but it only did so because the authorities felt that violence was not a morally acceptable response. Such however is not always the case.

We can think for example of how the Chinese government responded to the students who demonstrated in support of democracy in Tiananmen Square twenty-three years ago. The authorities did not hesitate to resort to violence to crush them. And even now in Ukraine, how would the Russians respond if they were confronted by a large crowd of peaceful protesters standing in front of their tanks? Based on the Russian behaviour so far, do we really think that the tanks would grind to a halt, the fighting would stop, and that peace would be restored?

Sadly, we live in a fallen sinful world. We pray “thy kingdom come” and “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, but all too often it seems as if the Kingdom of God is as far away today as it ever was. And where does that leave us as the disciples of Christ? Do we simply dismiss Jesus’ teaching as that of an other-worldly dreamer whose words have no real meaning or relevance in the ‘real’ world in which we live? Or do we try and live out his teaching, realizing that the cost can be terribly high?

For over 1600 years we Christians have debated and argued over how to resolve the tension between what Jesus taught and life as it is in our sin-filled world. Some people try and live the Sermon on the Mount while others, while paying it lip service, dismiss it as being impractical. But even as we Christians disagree about whether war is ever a morally acceptable option, we do agree on one thing and that is our moral obligation to care for all those who are victims, whether they be victims of the current war in Ukraine or anywhere else. We, the disciples of Christ, are to love and to care for all until the day finally dawns when God’s kingdom here on earth is a reality and his will is done on earth as it is in heaven. And God himself has promised that that day will surely come.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Hear us as we come to you in prayer on this late winter morning.

We thank you for this season slowly coming to its end, and for the early signs of the season of life that will soon be upon us.

We thank you for this weekend as well, a weekend that for many marks the start of the March Break and a welcome break from both routine and work. With so many travelling we pray for the well-being and safety of all.

We look around us and we see a world that is seemingly in chaos, filled with so much heartache and pain. Living here in this land and nation blessed with the peace, stability, and prosperity that it is, we have so much to be thankful for. So often we complain but help us to never forget that compared to most of your children, we are amongst the most blessed of all.

We pray this day for all the places in this world where there is little if any peace, and we especially offer up this prayer of intercession for the people of Ukraine. We pray for those who mourn for the death of a loved one. We pray for those who have been wounded and not just physically, but mentally as well. We pray for the millions who have been forced to flee with little more than the clothes on their backs and we pray too for those who wonder what has become of loved ones. May the war come to an end and may there be peace and justice. Guide all in positions of authority, granting them the knowledge and the courage to do what is just and right.

On this second Sunday in Lent as we continue the journey towards Good Friday and as we look at this sin-filled world in which we live, we remember the necessity of Good Friday and the promise of Easter Sunday; we thank you that sin, evil, and death will not have the final say and that in the end love, justice, and righteousness will prevail; they will prevail because the day is coming when your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In your Son's name we pray. Amen