

## **'That the evil of war shall not be again'**

**Andrew Bradstock (University of Otago)**

**Service for ANZAC Day 2010, Knox College**

During the build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 some enterprising people in the United States began producing car bumper stickers with the motif 'WWJB?' – 'Who Would Jesus Bomb?' A song with that title also became popular – you can still find a YouTube clip of the writer performing it.

The phrase was, of course, a play on the slogan popular among young Christians, 'WWJD?' – 'What Would Jesus Do?' – a shorthand explanation for their source of guidance for everyday living. Like all good prophetic statements, the power of the bumper sticker lay in its ability to highlight a stark reality through a combination of humour, directness and the absurd.

The point behind this, of course, was that the two main proposers of a military assault on Iraq were 'committed Christians'. It wasn't just that President Bush and Prime Minister Blair were leaders of what are some people like to call 'Christian nations', they were themselves known believers in the teachings and message of Jesus Christ. And as these stickers none too subtly pointed out, there is a certain, well, *incongruity* in followers of Jesus advocating war, violence and death as a way to deal with foreign policy challenges!

Of course, Bush and Blair were hardly the first 'Christian' leaders to advocate war. History is littered with examples of the Church endorsing military campaigns, of bishops blessing weapons and assuring combatants that God was on their side, of the Church even seeking to extend its own bounds at the point of a sword. It's as if Jesus must have been joking when he said 'love your enemies and do good to those who wish you ill', or St Paul hoping not to be taken too seriously when urging his readers 'do not be overcome by evil but overcome

evil with good'. 'All who take the sword will perish by the sword': surely that was a rebuke to a hot-headed disciple, not a warning for all time?

ANZAC Day, it seems to me, provides us with an important opportunity to think again about these 'hard sayings' of the New Testament. As a relative newcomer to New Zealand you might think it ill behoves me to say *anything* about what ANZAC Day should mean, but it has become clear to me over the past fifteen months that the increasing interest in what today stands for, particularly among those of us too young to have a direct connection to either of the world wars of the last century, comes as much from a concern to honour our heroic forebears as to learn the lessons of history so that never again will we or our descendants have to experience the pain and suffering *they* endured in those horrific events.

And let's just remind ourselves that they *were* absolutely horrific events. In the First World War alone, which gave rise, of course, to the first ANZAC Day, this country dispatched 110,000 men and women to Europe to fight, 18,000 thousand of whom were killed and 55,000 of whom were wounded. Every New Zealand family was touched directly or indirectly by the War, for even those who returned were mentally, if not physically, scarred by their experience. The statistics are appalling, but statistics don't move us as much as stories and imagination, as much as remembering that each of those 'numbers' was a human being like us, a son, a father, an uncle, a mother, a daughter, an aunt.

My colleague Kevin Clements, Director of the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies here at Otago, tells how he and his wife, on a visit to Belgium a few years ago, stood before the graves of three Māori soldiers aged between 18 and 23, noting that they came from small towns in New Zealand and wondering what each thought about the service they had been called upon to perform. 'We could imagine the excitement as they set off as warriors to fight in foreign places', Kevin writes, 'but when the reality of war set in, what did they then think about

being so far from their own homes, family, hapu and iwi? ...they had barely emerged from adolescence and their short lives were terminated.' This is the reality we remember today, whether we have clear or hazy memories of those in our own particular families who were involved. And these are the people that, in the words of our Call to Worship, we have gathered to pay tribute to, whose courage and devotion we have pledged to remember before God – and alongside whom, perhaps, we might also want to include those who did not fight, whose action, often misunderstood at the time, also took courage.

But we have also pledged to ensure 'that the evil of war shall not be again'. Can we do that? What does that mean exactly? How can we take the challenge of the New Testament not to return evil for evil, to love our enemies, to be peace-makers, in today's world?

Well, Jesus and Paul were of course addressing their remarks to individuals rather than governments, and change always has to start with us. Do we try always to resist the temptation to respond violently in testing or difficult situations? Do we try first to be reconciled with those with whom we have differences, rather than allow resentment to fester and mutate into hostility and conflict? It is salutary to remember that Jesus' teaching on reconciliation was addressed particularly to religious people, those who thought their worship would be acceptable, even while the grievances they had with their sister or brother remained unresolved.

It's a simple, but often forgotten truth, that violence and aggression are almost always signs of an inability, or unwillingness, to find alternative ways to sort out differences – ways that will be more challenging but which will bring a more satisfactory outcome. As we see in so many contexts, in our own personal relationships, in the various communities and groups in which we move, and in the wider world, wars, fighting, any violent or aggressive response to disagreement or difference seldom results in lasting peace and stability – it merely creates

more resentment, sows the seeds of further discord. Yet taking the trouble to explore and to deal with the root causes of disagreement, to engage in genuine and open-hearted dialogue and negotiation, can reap real and much more permanent rewards.

The picture that we have of Jesus in the gospels is of one totally committed, through his healings, his parables, his message of the kingdom, to just such a concern to see the roots of injustice dealt with and restoration and reconciliation achieved. Whether it's the father welcoming back the son who has spent his inheritance, or the extortioner summoned down from his tree, for Jesus the emphasis is on healing wounds and rebuilding community, not laying blame and provoking conflict.

And in that, I believe, lies a challenge for all of us who claim to follow his way: how do we witness to these radical priorities in *our* lives and situations, where violence is all too often the first rather than the last resort? For witness to it we must, however hesitantly or imperfectly, in the face of so many challenges in our neighbourhoods, in our towns and cities, in our nation, in our world, crying out for fresh solutions, for solutions forged out of dialogue and consensus instead of conflict and retribution. And when we do offer such a witness the evidence suggests we can make a real impact.

Like many here I have seen the fruits of this approach in a number of contexts – in schools, in prisons, even in international affairs. In 2003 I saw a group of American church leaders come close to stopping the invasion of Iraq through the promotion of a plan which, while aiming to achieve the removal of that country's despotic leader, would have done so without the need to inflict war and death on the Iraqi people. More recently I have been observing the work of the same church leaders with respect to the war on terror and the situation in Afghanistan, their appeals to their President to invest, not in more troops and weapons, but in laying foundations for long-term political reconciliation, in programmes to develop

agriculture, build a better infrastructure and provide more education, health and other basic needs.

The premise of the Church leaders is that there is no finite number of 'terrorists' to be eliminated, and that to lessen the threat that they pose it is necessary to pay attention to the injustices which they believe they are responding to, which attract ever more numbers into their ranks. Instead of trying to 'fight terror', resources need to go, as one of those church leaders, Jim Wallis, puts it, into 'draining the swamp of injustice around which the mosquitoes of terrorism breed'.

'When all you have is a hammer', they are saying, 'everything looks like a nail' – but now is the time to see what other tools there might be in the peace-making box. In a profound and insightful way these Church leaders are showing the relevance and wisdom of the words of prophet Micah we heard just a few minutes ago – that only when people are able to sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, only when they have a stake in their society such that none can make them afraid, will we see weapons turned into instruments of peace and the nations learning war no more.

And if you think this kind of action – what I would call 'good public theology' – amounts to simply 'whistling in the dark', there are signs that a fresh approach to Afghanistan *is* being considered in the White House. And the churches' plan for Iraq received serious consideration at the very highest levels of the US administration, the United Nations, the Vatican, and, especially, the British cabinet, and might well have been adopted had circumstances been slightly different.

So those of us who take Jesus and his teachings seriously have a necessary and prophetic word to speak into our world today, a world in which 35 people are killed each hour as a

direct result of warfare, 90% of them civilians and half of them children. It is not a word all our leaders will want to hear, for it calls for a change of attitude akin to what the Bible calls *metanoia*, the adoption of a wholly new perspective in a spirit of repentance and humility. It requires *strength* – not the strength which displays itself in bellicose talk and action, but that depth of character which is prepared to take risks for the sake of potentially a greater good. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu – who has taken just this risk of pursuing forgiveness and reconciliation in his native South Africa, says,

Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking, but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end there will be real healing from having dealt with the real situation... True reconciliation is not cheap. It cost God the death of his only begotten Son.

Our Gospel reading reminded us that Jesus' whole ministry was grounded upon an explicit rejection of the temptation to acquire power according to the ways of this world – a rejection which, as Tutu reminds us, led ultimately to the cross and the resurrection, that powerful reminder that God has overcome death with life, that to inherit the kingdom means having the strength to lay down one's life, not using one's strength to preserve it at all costs. And in calling us to follow him, Jesus challenges *us* to rethink all *our* values in the light of his coming kingdom, a kingdom which is also already among us. This is what I believe Paul means when he says that our citizenship is no longer in this world but in heaven. We have to weigh up the calls upon us to act in certain ways – including, God forbid, the call to fight – in the light of our primary allegiance to Christ, in the light of Peter's affirmation in Acts 5 that

our obedience is first to God rather than any human authority. That is why that slogan 'What Would Jesus Do?' is so challenging if taken literally.

And as we live out this new ethic, as we 'seek first the kingdom', so we will impact on our society and our world. Many of you here are, or will be, people of influence – in business, in politics, in law, in the sciences, leaders in your community or perhaps even nationally: do think through what the challenge that Jesus gives us to be peace-makers means in our world, and in the world of tomorrow. And those of us with a more humble calling, all of us who consider ourselves pilgrims in the way, consider how we can make a difference, can help promote lasting peace and an end to war.

None of the heroic New Zealand men and women who fought in the First War survives now: in fact, of the 65 million people estimated to have taken part in that God-forsaken event, only 6 are known to be still alive: we cannot personally make any commitment to them. But the greatest tribute we can pay them is to honour the promise we made in our Call to Worship, 'so far as in us lies, that the evil of war shall not be again'.