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BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS,

FOR THEY WILL BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD

The axiom ‘timing is everything’ has presented itself with some force over the course of the past week. It was some time ago that I settled on the Beatitudes as the text for this service.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

What I didn’t know at the time was that the Secretary of State for Defence, the Minister for the Armed Forces and the Chief of the General Staff were preparing a series of speeches which would comment on the move from a post-war to a pre-war generation¹. I’ve sent a note to General Sir Patrick Sanders

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68097048>

thanking him for his generosity in providing a useful ‘talking point’ for today’s sermon. I think he would wish me to reassure you that the Walmington-on-Sea detachment of the Home Guard is not yet forming up in the church hall.

There is, however, a significant resonance between the shift in mindset encouraged with the change in language – *post-war to pre-war* – and the subject of this sermon. Both attempt to focus our attention on the physical reality of conflict. However challenged ... disturbed ... moved we are by the images of violence and destruction from Gaza, from Ukraine, from Yemen, from Syria, from countless other conflicts around the globe, there is a distance between such situations and our everyday existence. Our compassion is stretched and, at times, our interest wanes. We are sorry for the sufferings of others, but their very ‘otherness’ detaches us from any sense of responsibility.

A *pre-war* generation has moral responsibility and agency. It recognises both the proximity of violence and the fragility of peace. It understands what is threatened through challenges to the international order and accepts the need to be responsible citizens of a global community. A *pre-war* generation cannot shut its eyes or turn its back on those who would use violence for political expediency. A *pre-war* generation must understand the privilege – and cost – of peace.

Jesus said “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God”.

Who are the peacemakers?

What does it mean to be ‘at peace’?

How should peace be achieved?

So many questions fill my mind when reflecting on this verse of scripture, and I know I am in good company. Countless generations of preachers and interpreters have wrestled with this text. For some, its clearest application is to begin in the spiritual domain and the establishment of peace with God. Others see a necessary step as the acceptance of peace in our hearts, peace with ourselves. But the surest application must be found in peace between people. If I may be allowed to quote John Wesley in such a hallowed setting:

Thus far our Lord has been more directly employed in teaching the religion of the heart. He has shown what Christians are to be. He proceeds to show, what they are to do also; - how inward holiness is to exert itself in our outward conversation.

He goes on to define peacemakers as those who:

labour with all their might, either to prevent this fire of hell from being kindled, or, when it is kindled, from breaking out, or, when it is broke out, from spreading any farther ...

They use all innocent arts, and employ all their strength, all the talents which God has given them, as well to preserve peace where it is, as to restore it where it is not.²

Peace between people – so much easier to say than achieve.

The Church, in all her forms and across the centuries, has wrestled with the appropriate way to be a peacemaker. The early church produced a good deal of commentary on the place of nonviolence. Justin Martyr being one of the early examples, writing:

we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.³

Tertullian building on this theme:

² <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.v.xxiii.html>

³ <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>

how will a Christian man war, nay, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword which the Lord has taken away?⁴

That such a tradition remained within Christianity following the conversion of Constantine demonstrates the firm roots upon which the Christian pacifist movements find their strength. You may be expecting the Chaplain General of His Majesty's Land Forces to be resisting such movements – I'm afraid I will disappoint you. Christian pacifism has a critical voice within the spectrum of peace-making. I applaud the conviction of my brothers and sisters who maintain a rejection of violence. I wish I were able to share their strength – but my faith places me on a different path.

All chaplains serving in the Armed Forces of the United Kingdom do so as non-combatants. We do not bear arms and the country does not expect us to. Although we share non-combatant status with medics, we do not share their ability for

⁴ <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0302.htm>

self-defence. It could be argued, in light of this, that the chaplain becomes a symbol of peace in the midst of conflict. The chaplain places herself in harm's way, willingly accepts the dangers of warfare, in order to support others. I offer four different accounts which illustrate how chaplains contribute to the spectrum of peace-making.

The Reverend Theodore Bayley Hardy.

Theodore Hardy was 35 years old when he was ordained priest in the Church of England. A background in education led to his appointment as Headmaster of Bentham Grammar School in 1907. He held this appointment until 1913 when he moved to a parish appointment in the Lake District. It was during this time that his wife fell ill, eventually dying in 1914. At the outbreak of war, Hardy applied for a temporary commission but was rejected as being too old – he was 51. By 1916, the need for volunteers was so great that he was appointed to a temporary commission and attached to 8th Bn the Lincolnshire Regiment.

On 18th October 1917 Hardy was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for:

volunteering to go with a rescue party for some men who had been left stuck in the mud the previous night between the enemy's outpost line and our own. All the men except one were brought in. He then organised a party for the rescue of this man, and remained with it all night, though under rifle-fire at close range, which killed one of the party. With his left arm in splints, owing to a broken wrist, and under the worst weather conditions, he crawled out with patrols to within seventy yards of the enemy and remained with wounded men under heavy fire.

On the 17th December 1917 he was awarded the Military Cross:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in tending the wounded. The ground on which he worked was constantly shelled and the casualties were heavy. He continually assisted in finding and carrying wounded and in guiding stretcher bearers to the aid post.

On the 7th July 1918 he was awarded the Victoria Cross:

For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty on many occasions. Although over fifty years of age, he has, by his fearlessness, devotion to men of his battalion, and quiet, unobtrusive manner, won the respect and admiration of the whole division. His marvellous energy and endurance would be remarkable even in a very much younger man, and his valour and devotion are exemplified in the following incidents: —

An infantry patrol had gone out to attack a previously located enemy post in the ruins of a village ... Hearing firing, he followed the patrol, and about four hundred yards beyond our front line ... found an officer of the patrol dangerously wounded. He remained with the officer until he was able to get assistance to bring him in. During this time there was a great deal of firing, and an enemy patrol actually penetrated between the spot at which the officer was lying and our front line and captured three of our men.

On a second occasion, when an enemy shell exploded in the middle of one of our posts, the Reverend T. B. Hardy at once made his way to the spot, despite the shell and trench mortar fire which was going on at the time, and set to work to extricate the buried men. He succeeded in

getting out one man who had been completely buried. He then set to work to extricate a second man, who was found to be dead. During the whole of the time that he was digging out the men this chaplain was in great danger, not only from shell fire, but also because of the dangerous condition of the wall of the building which had been hit by the shell which buried the men.

On a third occasion he displayed the greatest devotion to duty when our infantry, after a successful attack, were gradually forced back to their starting trench. After it was believed that all our men had withdrawn from the wood, Chaplain Hardy came out of it, and on reaching an advanced post asked the men to help him to get in a wounded man. Accompanied by a serjeant, he made his way to the spot where the man lay, within ten yards of a pill-box which had been captured in the morning, but was subsequently recaptured and occupied by the enemy. The wounded man was too weak to stand, but between them the chaplain and the serjeant eventually succeeded in getting him to our lines. Throughout the day the enemy's artillery, machine-gun, and trench mortar fire was continuous, and caused many casualties.

Notwithstanding, this very gallant chaplain was seen

moving quietly amongst the men and tending the wounded, absolutely regardless of his personal safety.

Hardy received his VC from the King and in the presence of his daughter who was a nurse working in France. Hardy was wounded in action on the 11th of October 1918 and died of his wounds the following week. A subsequent painting of the presentation by Terrence Cuneo was to deeply upset Hardy's daughter – her father was portrayed with dirty boots, something he would never have worn in the presence of the King. A photograph of the event shows him with gleaming boots. His medals were gifted to the RACHD some 20 years ago.

Hardy's version of peace-making was rooted in total commitment to his soldiers. (Some have suggested he was possessed of a death-wish.) Creating peace in the midst of the chaos of the battlefield is a gift that many of that generation shared with their troops.

The Revd David Stewart

The Reverend David Stewart is a less well-known character. A Second World War Chaplain, he was serving with the 35th Casualty Clearing Station in 1945. On the 15th May, a month after its initial 'liberation' his unit was moved to Bergen-Belsen. So powerful was the ministry of Stewart and his chaplaincy colleagues, that one senior medical officer said of them – *'The true physicians here are the Padres ... and they are doing more good here than anyone else.'*

It is only fitting to reflect on Stewart's work following our collective acknowledgement of Holocaust Memorial Day yesterday. In just over five weeks at the camp, Stewart contributed to a profound ministry bringing comfort to the survivors. He was one of the first chaplains to write an account of this ministry and in it tells many powerful and moving stories:

In one testimony Stewart told the story of a teenage boy called David. He was clearly deeply moved by his relationship with David and shared something of how the

boy would 'sit and gaze out of the window and say nothing' on his numerous visits to Stewart's office. After reflecting on this, Stewart then said: 'There does not seem to be any peace for the Davids of this world'.

Stewart described another of his patients as 'the girl who did not want to live'. Her name was Magda, and when Stewart first encountered her in the hospital she would lie in bed, pretending to sleep, refusing to speak to anyone. Another survivor, Marika, who spoke English and acted as interpreter, told Stewart that it was because '[s]he doesn't want to get better. She prefers to die'. This seems to have emboldened Stewart, who the next day went to speak to her. He remembered the conversation:

'What do you want to talk with me about?'

'I want you to tell me about yourself.'

'There is nothing to tell. I am just a Jewess. From Hungary. My family is dead. I am alive, unfortunately. There is no one in the world to care whether I live or die. It would be better for me to die, for I think God himself has surely forgotten me.'

'No, Magda, God has not forgotten you. And there are many who will be glad you lived.'

She gave a short bitter laugh.

'Who are they?'

‘People you will meet when you go back into the world again.’

‘But if I don’t go back, I shall not meet them and how can they be glad or sorry?’

‘Well, I shall be very glad if you get better.’ ...

Bit by bit she told me about herself ... I brought several other girls to see her, taking care to choose those with a cheerful nature and firm character. To my joy, one of them became her fast friend. She, too, had no relations. When I left Belsen she was convalescing rapidly.⁵

Pastoral ministry in the face of such horrors is the chaplain’s vocation. Finding hope in the brokenness of warfare, where many are victims, is an act of peace-making. Listening to the story of the survivor began their journey to peace.

The Reverend Sam Davies

Our third peacemaker is the Rev’d Sam Davies, chaplain to the famous Glosters of the Korean war. I visited Korea last year, including the Imjin River and the terrain over which so many

⁵ <https://academic.oup.com/ehr/advance-article/doi/10.1093/ehr/cead101/7244569>

battles were fought. Gloster Hill battle memorial at the foot of the infamous hill 235 where over 500 soldiers of the Glosters were taken captive and many others lost their lives. Gloucester Cathedral holds a celtic cross carved in stone by the CO of the Glosters, Lt Col James P Carne. Their Padre, the Revd Sam Davies, was allowed by their captors to hold church services - he renamed the education room in which they met 'The Church of the Captivity'. Those who survived this ordeal spoke warmly of his support and care - many didn't survive.

In 1954, having returned to the UK Padre Davies wrote a book about his experiences. In it he gave an account of the church services held during captivity. Each service would end by singing the hymn 'Faith of our fathers, living still'. It was both a source of spiritual encouragement and political defiance. Although the words may jar a little to some contemporary sentiments, the verses became a rallying cry for those in captivity; the second verse is indicative:

Our fathers, chained in prisons dark,
were still in heart and conscience free;

and blest would be their children's fate,
if they, like them should die for Thee:
Faith of our fathers! holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death!

Peace-making is not without cost. The awful bloodiness of war is as real today as it has been throughout most of the last century. Just before Christmas, the RACHD hosted its second cohort of Ukrainian chaplains. They come to the UK for a two-week training package but in truth, they have been able to teach us far more than we are able to teach them.

“Mothers should not have to bury their sons and daughters.”

These were the first words spoken to me through an interpreter by one of our Ukrainian brothers. I had asked ‘what had made him want to serve’ and his answer was clear. *“The men and women of my country are under attack, my church building is damaged and most of my village evacuated. Others are trained to fight, but God has not called me to this. I have no medical training, but I can offer medicine for the soul.”*

Peace-making for these chaplains is not a choice. Their eyes make clear that fighting for peace is understood as a Gospel imperative. Reconciliation is for the future, but there can be no reconciliation without justice. This is no abstracted debate on Radio 4 – it is visceral, emotive and passionate. One day, perhaps someone will stand here and tell their story.

Peacemakers, in the midst of a chaotic, broken humanity. As I think on the challenges they face, I know that they will be called children of God.

Jesus said, “blessed are the peacemakers”. May that blessing be ours as we seek peace in this time.