

The Challenge of Peace

Some Directions from Scriptures

Third in a series

"When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are to enter and occupy, and dislodges great nations before you...you shall doom them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy." (Dt. 7:1-2)

"You have heard the commandment, 'You shall love your countryman but hate your enemy.' My command to you is: love your enemies, pray for your persecutors." (Mt. 5:43-44)

By Jim Lackey

Washington (NC) — Scripture seemingly presents contradictory images of war and peace. God is portrayed at times in the Old Testament as a great warrior who helped the Israelites slay their enemies and who provided them with security.

But in the New Testament Christ tells his followers that they must forgive their enemies and turn the other cheek to their tormentors.

In their new pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," the U.S. bishops note that the treatment of war and peace in Scripture — particularly in the Old Testament — must be understood in different ways depending on the situation and in a variety of contexts.

The Scriptures "do not provide us with detailed answers to the specifics of the questions we face today," the bishops remark.

"They do not speak specifically of nuclear war or nuclear weapons, for these were beyond the imagination of the communities in which the Scriptures were formed.

"The sacred texts do, however, provide us with urgent direction when we look at today's concrete realities."

In beginning to discuss war and peace in the Bible the bishops establish very early that while the image of a warrior God indeed was present in the Old Testament, it was gradually transformed to another image in which God no longer was identified with military victory and might.

The metaphor of a warrior God, the pastoral comments, provided the Israelites with a sense of security, particularly at a time when they were smaller and weaker than other nations and would have to surmount overwhelming obstacles if they were to survive. The metaphor "was also a call to faith and to trust; the mighty God was to be obeyed and followed."

Later, however, "other images and other understandings of God's activity became predominant in expressing the faith of God's people."

Peace in the Old Testament, though, is equally complex, the pastoral indicates.

For one, peace was closely linked to the covenant between God and his chosen people. And fidelity to the covenant meant not only that Israel "put its trust in God alone and look only to him for its security," but also that society care for the needy and helpless and live in "justice and integrity."

Thus the prophet Ezekiel "condemned in no uncertain terms the false prophets who said there was peace in the land while idolatry and injustice continued." And Jeremiah and Isaiah condemned the leaders of Israel when, in search of peace, "they depended upon their own strength or alliances with other nations rather than trusting in God."

Yet another image of peace in the Old Testament comes from the hope expressed by God's people for an ultimate peace — an "eschatological vision" — in which the coming of the Messiah would signal the beginning of a time when all creation would be secure from harm. This peace was part of the covenant between God and his people, and so the people strove for greater fidelity to God as part of their longing for this peace.

In the New Testament, however, "all discussion of war and peace...must be seen within the context of the unique revelation of God that is Jesus Christ," the bishops say.

In contrast to the Old Testament, the pastoral says, in the New Testament there is "no notion of a warrior God who will lead the people in a historical victory over its enemies." The only war is found in "apocalyptic images" of the final moments of the world.

At the same time Jesus' words called for a new way of life. "One of the most striking characteristics of this new way is forgiveness."

Christ's words also call for a love which extended even to one's enemies.

The words of Jesus (on love and forgiveness) would remain an impossible, abstract ideal were it not for two things: the actions of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit," according to the bishops.

In his actions, Jesus "showed the way of living in God's reign." He forgave all who came to him, made the mercy of God present in a world of violence and oppression, and pointed out the injustices of his time. He especially showed his love, a love which "led him even to the giving of his own life to effect redemption..."

"Jesus refused to defend himself with force or with violence... Even at his death Jesus cried out for forgiveness for those who were his executioners," the pastoral says.

In his gift of the Spirit, the pastoral adds, the risen Jesus simultaneously left his gift of peace, a gift so intense and powerful "that the remembrance of that gift and the daily living of it became the hallmark of the community of faith."

Like the Old Testament, though, there also was a forward-looking aspect to the new peace which Christ established. Though the early Christian communities struggled with sin and persecution, "their experience of the Spirit of God and their memory of the Christ who was with them nevertheless enabled them to look forward with unshakable

confidence to the time when the fullness of God's reign would make itself known in the world."

Thus, conclude the bishops, Christians are left with two "profoundly religious meanings of peace" that influence all other meanings: the peace "which remains before us in hope," and the gift of peace that "is already ours in the reconciliation effected in Jesus Christ."

Christians, "because we have been gifted with God's peace in the risen Christ," are called not only to peace in themselves but also to the "making of peace in our world," say the bishops.

And "as disciples and as children of God" it is the task of Christians to seek ways to make God's mercy, forgiveness, justice and love "visible in a world where violence and enmity are too often the norm."

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NEXT: When can nuclear weapons be used?

Family Planning Information

A Natural Family Planning information session will take place from 7:30 to 9 p.m., Friday, July 29, at Lakeside Hospital, West Avenue, Brockport. Sponsored by NFP of Rochester, the session is free and open to anyone wishing to learn more about this family planning method.

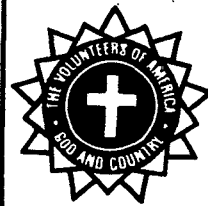
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It is not the calendar method. Pre-registration is required from NFP Education (716) 464-8705.

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