



Arnhem, Friday 19th September 2008

Spirituality and the Battlefield

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Our organiser, Sophie, very generously generated a title for my address today when I was in too much chaos over recent weeks to produce one of my own in time! “Spirituality and the Battlefield”. But I want to adjust it very slightly if I may to “Spirituality *from* the Battlefield” – and I make that change because I think that revised title will actually explain the impetus behind the thoughts I am going to try and string together. In fact it does so with remarkable precision. I want to take you on a journey through some of the issues I have been compelled to explore and reflect upon by my own experience of serving as a military chaplain.



If my intellectual limitations end up being demonstrated all too readily then perhaps it was always likely to be so. According to HG Wells “The professional military mind is by necessity an inferior and unimaginative mind; no man of high intellectual quality would willingly imprison his gifts in such a calling.”

Condemned therefore as I am to inferior thinking, I offer you my thoughts anyway!

I want to read to you words from a speech by a former British Prime Minister:

“No language can describe adequately the condition... of the Balkan peninsula – Serbia, Bosnia, Hercegovina and other provinces – political intrigue, constant rivalries, a total absence of all public spirit... hatred of all races, animosities of rival religions and absence of any controlling power. Nothing short of an army of 50,000 of the best troops would produce anything like order in these parts.”

The former Prime Minister in question was Benjamin Disraeli. His speech was made in parliament 130 years ago.

I think it could have been said by almost Statesman in any decade since.

When I first read those words, I had just returned from an operational tour in the Balkans. Having been a witness to the confusion and dislocation of refugees, burnt out villages, mass graves and of course at their root the great crashing waves of anger that exist between the different communities - I knew I had to learn more. I came back from the battlefield with the same question of incomprehension any of us might utter – “WHY?”

In the years that followed I determined to try and learn something of the baffling complexities that formed the political, religious and ethnic history of these troubled lands.

It was in reading Michael Rose's autobiographical account of his time as Commander of the United Nations Protection Force (UNProFor) in Bosnia during 1994 that I came across the Disraeli quote.

My bookmark at the time was quite incidentally this small piece of Ivy. It was from a wreath. We'd laid it on the coffin of Corporal Bell, 'Dinger' as we all knew him. His was the first military funeral I ever officiated at in my Army ministry - I am afraid it wasn't the last, neither on that tour nor since.

During the repatriation ceremony the leaf had fallen to the hanger floor as we carried his body to the C-130 Troop transport that bore him to his family in the UK. The bookmark and the passage make for me a deeply personal, not to say tragic connection, between the individual experience of an ordinary Nottinghamshire lad and the great faceless machinations of history. This conjunction signifies to me the profound link between the highly particular and the individual, and the grand narratives of nations.

This connection is something I want to focus on in my address today. I do so for a number of reasons:

Firstly, if a chaplain has an expertise at all, then this would be it - the realm of the individual; the inner man and woman; the troubled conscience, their spiritual life, the spectrum of human emotional conflicts. Our speciality, in the pastoral tradition of Christian ministry, is the individual. And not without good reason; I believe that we see a similar focus in the ministry of Christ. For sure, we read the Gospels and we see him teaching and preaching to the masses. He is quite willing to address the gathered crowd, send out a public challenge to the authority of those in power, and criticise the prevailing religious and political institutions of the day - but overall, we would have to admit that far more New Testament column inches are given over to recording the individual encounter, the meal time conversation, the interrupted plans, the wedding party, a funeral... I could go on and on.

The individual encountering Jesus is at the heart, it is the very stuff, of the Gospel narratives.

And secondly, I would observe that there were good strategic reasons for doing this. At the conclusion of Jesus earthly ministry it could be persuasively argued that he had personally achieved very little - apart from in the lives of a relatively small handful of men and women. It was these men and women who were now entirely responsible for the continuation of his ministry and teaching. However, such had been the transformational nature of their time with Christ, it could be said that a chain reaction began. I suppose sociologists or philosophers would say it began the proliferation the Christian idea; socio-biologists might call it the Christ-meme. Person-to-person it has transformed societies that "caught" its contagion and it has proliferated over the centuries, propogating itself through a great variety of human culture. In this I may be saying nothing more radical than that ultimately societies are themselves transformed by transformed and empowered individuals.

There is only one mechanism for changing human societies - the actions of individual human beings. We play our part either in resisting or implementing those changes. To repeat a slogan, "you can either be part of the problem or part of the solution"; the empowering choice is that it's up to us which.

If we are prepared to admit that individuals in society are so important, let me now go on tell you about one individual I met during my time in Bosnia, a young Muslim. Their story holds echoes

of many others I heard both at the time and since. One night, Serb irregulars had entered their village and began moving from house to house. Alongside their mother they hid under the kitchen table as the sound of shouts and beatings came closer. From the darkness of this temporary refuge they could hear events unfold in the next room, then the unspeakable sounds of their father and brother being murdered, and then of their house being set on fire. The two of them were able to escape in the chaos that followed. When they finished their story they added, and I will never forget the precise words, they are seared into my memory: “If God is merciful, one day I will do to them what they have done to me”.

And that’s it. That’s the problem of the Balkans in one sentence; in one sentiment; “I will do to them what they have done to me”. Every family has a blood feud, every individual a story that fuels the hatred.

It’s a situation repeating itself in conflicts the world over. In the long history of what in Northern Ireland has simply been named “the Troubles”, David Ervine, former paramilitary turned politician has called it “The hamster wheel to hell”. With monotonous interminable circularity these cycles of violence become self-perpetuating. Everyone who kills has a reason that, from a certain warped perspective can justify the vengeful acts they take. These acts themselves lead to others similarly justifying the violence of their own response – and the wheel spins recklessly onwards gathering momentum and crushing hope before it. No one has the boldness to step off the cycle of violence-leads-to-revenge-leads-to-violence, but each act in each generation adds another kick to keep the wheel insanely spinning. Truly “the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children to third and fourth generation”.

The oath of vengeance I heard did not come from the mouth of a bullish young man full of testosterone. It came from a girl I would estimate was no more than sixteen years old. I sometimes think she may well have children of her own by now. I wonder what stories they have been brought up with?

The maxim that has been taken by the Bridge to the Future Foundation has been “forward-looking remembering”. I am a great believer in that. I accept all those maxims such as “those who do not read history are condemned to repeat it”. So I find it strange to be saying what I do now - sometimes it is the remembering that is the problem. Sometimes what we need is a good deal of forgetting.

At the cross Jesus prayed “father forgive them they know not what they do”. And he accepted men crucifying him with nails and piercing him with a spear.

I mentioned David Ervine earlier. His is not a story that can be described as truly noble. He was a man of violence. A loyalist paramilitary. He served prison terms repeatedly for acts of indiscriminate violence against the catholic community, but moved into politics and in partnership with others of a similar history to his own such as Martin McGuinness from the republican movement, have been instrumental in the Good Friday Agreement. We have largely ceased trading in violence and led others in their respective paramilitary communities in bringing the armed conflict to a halt. I will admit it has been something of an uneasy peace. Occasional eruptions of violence have continued, but as time has gone on that great spinning wheel of vengeance has slowed. It is not yet at rest, and none of us can say when, or even if, that will ever be. But life for ordinary people is in significant measures very improved. Many of us struggle to be entirely comfortable with how this massive reduction in hostilities has been achieved. Murderers have gone unpunished in early release schemes. Many who used to spout hatred and violence are not

exactly calling everyone to love their neighbour; they have just agreed not to reach for the gun and shoot their neighbour – which, honestly, is a very limited peace as peace goes.

I just feel that the longer we go with this fuzzy peace, the more likely real peace will be to arrive.

I want to say a few words about what I want to describe as “the fuzzy logic of reconciliation”.

I am quite proud of that phrase but I think I am going to have to work quite hard to justify what I mean. And I do have a precise meaning in mind.

For too long, war and peace have been seen as binary in nature. In this 0-or-1-world, the status is either ‘in conflict’ or ‘at peace’. It is either one or the other.

As a former research scientist myself I want to import some mathematical concepts originally developed for the field of quantum mechanics and since then extended into the discipline of formal logic.

Going back to Aristotle, one of the fundamental rules of philosophy has been the law of the excluded middle. Namely, it cannot be true to say “this is a table” and also true to say “this is not a table” both at the same time. It sounds obvious. Fuzzy logic however, or multivalent logic as it may also be known, admits that there are some situations where that does not quite hold. Let’s look at the implications of what I am saying as we apply this to war and peace. It could be argued that the current situation in Northern Ireland is “one of peace”, it can also be validly said that it is “gross injustice masquerading as peace” – I think, in truth, we have a “fuzzy” peace.

This is not just a refined and remote philosophical point I am wanting to argue here.

In this sort of context, and by that I mean a conference that has aims to change the future, this is a serious point to want to make. I have grave doubts that simply calling for disarmament will achieve it. Edi has made a persuasive case for the complete amorality of the amount the world spends on arms. Over a trillion dollars annually. But I must confess I have no confidence that anyone will listen. In fact I think we are in danger of being wholly dismissed for our naivety. I think there are many pragmatic reasons why we can never expect to gain a hearing for that call. With the best will in the world an ambassador will sit with us patiently to show willing but never seriously think there is a cat in hell’s chance of anything remotely like it being worked out. What situation at the moment will cause Russia to disarm unilaterally?

It is hopelessly optimistic. Rather like Francis Fukuyama’s book “The End of History” – written as the iron curtain fell and a number of nations wrested control of their destiny back into their own hands. There was a belief it represented something of a worldwide victory of liberal democracy over competing systems. However, since then concepts of liberal democracy are at the very least being challenged in many parts of the world, and in some cases it is in retreat, notably with the rise of fundamentalism in some religions and philosophies. I deliberately include fundamentalist philosophies here because I would say that, for example, the economic policies of the World Bank demonstrate what can only be described as an economic fundamentalism in their view of “the market”. Even liberal democracy itself some would wish to see progress in a highly illiberal manner! I would suggest that to take a fundamentalist approach to calling for unilateral disarmament is similarly likely to be mistaken, and ultimately to fail.

And after all, the end we seek is peace. The point under discussion here is how we can actually achieve that.

I believe this is the most important point I want to make today: I would ask you to consider the possibility of exploring fuzzy peace. And why? Because if humanity can build a portfolio of peacemaking and reconciliation to rise albeit hesitantly from the ashes of examples such as Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone, or implement it in places with potential such as Zimbabwe or even Iraq, and then take it to really tough testing grounds such as the Balkans - then and only then can we ask the world to listen to us about truly global and ambitious strategies.

These solutions are much more complex than any of us would wish them to be. For example, the global commodities trade is being led by armaments to an obscene degree. However, it would be wrong of us to fail to recognise that this is the only dysfunctional trading pattern that humanity is engaged in. Even at their current levels the amount we spend on cosmetics annually would allow us to provide finance for the following: the provision of a basic education, clean water and sanitation, and meet the basic health care and nutritional needs of everyone (*everyone*) in the world who does not yet receive it. How many of us think that our lipstick or our aftershave is an ethical issue? (excluding the issue of animal testing)

If you think about it the fact that fast on the heels of fuelling humanity's capacity for violence is our desire to fuel our vanity. I think we have a problem here people! I think the problem is far wider and deeper than some of us would like to admit. And that is the nature of humanity itself.

Don't get me wrong. I love people! But I would be foolish to underestimate their capacity for evil, ignorance, complicity, prejudice, violence, vanity, pride and, well, you could make it a party game... how long can you make your list of degenerate human characteristics?!

I think we need to embrace a qualified form of the traditional Christian view of humanity, which in fact is pretty pessimistic. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God".

Utopianism is fuelled by biblical language related in fact to spiritual salvation not future history - in fact the development of the perfect world is *specifically ruled out* by Jesus who warned his followers that wars would never cease.

So is this a council of despair? Not in the least.

The choice as to whether conflicts persist in our world is down to the individuals who either sustain the momentum of violence or who, by their very reluctance to respond in anger, provide the very mire that prevents a self-perpetuating cycle of violence. This may just provide an opportunity for the "fuzzy-logic of reconciliation" to begin.

Affecting examples of establishing a peace in places with a long history of enmity may be the hardest target we ever set our sights on. Nevertheless I commend the enterprise to you - the prize will be worth gaining.