

Pentecost 24, November 15, 2009
Holy Trinity, Buffalo
The Reverend John A. Buerk

WAR AND CHRISTIANITY

This week we celebrated Veterans' Day – a day when we honor our service men and women who have given their lives in defense of our country. And, last week Pastor Olsen highlighted the role of our fallen soldiers when he preached about the tragedy at Fort Hood. Today we remember those service men and women who are related to our congregation.

As we all know religion and war have always been closely related – from the Crusades to the Thirty Years War following the Reformation. Our country provides chaplains for our armed services and an article in last Sunday's newspaper had a provocative discussion about that practice. Lutheran chaplains, however, have played an important spiritually supportive role for our military men and women.

But, we also know that war is a terrible thing. And it doesn't go away. In today's gospel Jesus is quoted as saying, **You will hear of wars and rumors of wars...**(Mark 13:7) And so it was - and is - and so it will be.

We often forget the horrible numbers when it comes to war casualties. If you go to a list of the highest number of casualties in war in all recorded history – the top two occurred in the 20th century. The first was WW II with a death toll of 55 million. Number two was a war in China led by Mao – 40 million people died - albeit most of them from famine. And lest we forget – 20 million Native Americans were killed during our country's early history.

The Thirty Years War in the 16th century in which 7 million people died was especially tragic. That war was a major part of Lutheran history. It was fought soon after the Reformation – it took place mostly in Germany – it was devastating – 7 million deaths represented about a quarter of the German population. Ostensibly it was the Protestants against the Catholics – but as is the case in most “religious” conflicts - it had more to do with power and property and money than with religion. Religion too often becomes the medium for the massacres of war.

One wonders about Christianity and war if one reads the gospels. One can wonder about fighting in a war if one is a Christian. The gospels have Jesus saying many things about the way his followers should behave, and war was not an option. Although war and killing are part and parcel of Jesus' religious tradition in the Old Testament. Even the Ten Commandments get skewed because they translate the fifth commandment as “Thou shalt not kill” - when in fact the Hebrew says, “Thou shalt not murder.”

The Hebrew scriptures have a lot of killing in them from Sampson killing ten thousand Philistine with the jaw bone of an ass – to David killing Goliath with a sling shot – to

Jacob's sons killing all the males of Shechem's tribe under very dubious circumstances, because he had violated Jacob's sister Dinah.

Still, "peace and martyrdom" was the mantra of early Christianity.

Although, Jesus did not condemn those who were soldiers. Remember the centurion who came to Jesus to see if he could heal his daughter? Jesus didn't say – quit the army – and I'll see what I can do. He told the man to go home and he would find that his daughter was well.

But, on the whole, Jesus preached pacifism – he was non violent. He told his followers that if someone hit you on one cheek you should also offer the other cheek. If a soldier asked you to carry his pack a mile, you should carry it two. It was the rule of the Empire that any soldier could ask a civilian to carry his pack – but not for more than a mile from the man's home. Jesus told those who followed him to **"go the second mile."**

Remember when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and one of his followers – presumably a disciple – pulled out a sword and cut off a soldier's ear? Jesus called him on it – he restored the ear and said, **"He who lives by the sword will die by the sword."**

On the whole, Christianity preached pacifism. And, that worked as long as the faith was a minority group. And pacifism is still the rule in some denominations such as the Quakers. The Quakers are highly respected, and although they are pacifists, they are willing to service in our armed forces and risk life and limb in caring for our wounded soldiers on the front lines.

Our government respects that religious tradition, but it appropriately has a lot of trouble with those who decide to be "pacifists" whenever a war breaks out.

But when did this shift take place – when did Christianity side with the state when killing was called for? It happened, ostensibly, when Christianity stopped being an oppressed religion, and became the religion of the state under the reign of Constantine. Constantine's mother was a Christian, and the story is that her son had a vision in which he saw a cross in the sky and heard the words, "In this sign conquer." And conquer he did!

He ended up declaring that Christianity was to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. Not that there might not have been some political motives behind his piety – if you can imagine that!!! Making Christianity the state religion provided a cause celebre for him to bring all the diverse religious traditions in the Empire into line with his agenda. Again, it is not an uncommon thing to have religion and the state linked. Even the United States did – albeit not quite the way Newt Gingrich envisioned it. If you want a lot of information about our country's ties to religion in its formative years read Dan Brown's new book, "The Lost Symbol".

As you can imagine, when Constantine made Christianity the state religion, the role the faith played in the Western world changed. It was no longer a faith that could stand on the sidelines and let the state do all the policing and warring. All of a sudden, Christians

were in charge of running the state, and to run a state you have to exercise the power of the sword – because if you don't - someone else will.

Luther tried to balance things out by identifying the state as an entity along side the church – he called them the two kingdoms. Both, he said, were “ordained” by God, and each had its function. They were both part of God’s scheme to manage the world and civilization. But don’t forget this was a time when a prince could be a bishop, and the Pope had an army, and kings ruled by divine right.

Today, however, we have a serious separation between church and state in this country. And yet we still have chaplains, and the United States is the most “religious” country in the world. And the president can say with out impunity what President Obama said at the memorial service at Fort Hood this past week. **No faith justifies these murderous and craven acts. No just and loving God looks upon them with favor.**

It is sometimes difficult to deal with religion and the state when it comes to war. During the Second World War, German soldiers had the words, “Gott mit uns” – “God is with us” on their belt buckles. Japanese pilots participated in religious ceremonies before they took off on suicide bombing missions. And remember Abraham Lincoln’s famous response to William Seward when Seward told Lincoln that God was on his side? Lincoln said, **I am more concerned that we are on God’s side, than I am that he is on ours.**

We live in a remarkable country – a country with the Statue of Liberty on one coast and the Golden Gate Bridge on the other – both symbols of welcome for those who are seeking freedom. We don’t always get it right, but we try. We sometimes make mistakes – big ones – from slavery to the genocide of Native Americans. And we struggle - not knowing if we are doing the right thing. And sometimes the answers must wait till the next life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran Pastor who was hanged by the Nazis just a few weeks before the end of the Second WW because of his effort to assassinate Hitler. On his way to the gallows Bonhoeffer was escorted by a Roman Catholic priest to whom he said, “Father, in five minutes, I will know more than you!”

Life has many struggles and challenges and questions. We use our minds and our judgment the best we can. We use our faith as a guide to what is the just and loving thing to do. But in the end, Bonhoeffer was right! As Jesus said in our gospel lesson: **Beware that no one leads you astray...the end is still to come.**

And in the end there will be justice and peace because all will be ruled by our Lord, the Prince of Peace.