

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Lent II 2022.

Philippians 3: 17-4: 1

St. Luke 13: 31-35 or Luke 9: 28-36

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“Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; through war arise against me, yet I will be confident.”  
Psalm 27: 3

C.S. Lewis’ brilliant apologetic, *The Screwtape Letters*, is written as a senior demon giving advice to a rather incompetent junior demon, about how to get a young man to turn away from following Jesus Christ... If they can’t keep this young man from going to Church, they want him to go to a Church which they hope will be unhelpful. Demon Wormwood writes,

[This young man might go to a local church where] the Vicar is a man who has been so long engaged in watering down the faith to make it easier for... [the] congregation... In order to spare the laity all ‘difficulties’ he has deserted both the lectionary and the appointed psalms... [The demons are] thus safe from the danger that any truth not already familiar to him and to his flock should ever reach them through Scripture...

What is Lewis’ point?... Lewis is warning against reading only a bit of the Bible which suits our tastes. As well, Lewis (who was a layperson) is giving a gentle poke toward clergy who “dumb down” the gospel to make it easier or more appealing to people. Some of what Jesus Christ teaches is *hard* – and we shouldn’t try to glide over the hard bits...

The gospel shouldn’t be reacting to the world’s agenda. Rather, we pray for God’s kingdom: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...” We want the good news to transform the world... God looks for ordinary people like you and like me to transform the world, and God gives people of faith the gift of the Holy Spirit, so we can accomplish it!...

The world isn’t to transform the Church. The Church’s job is to transform the world... How can scripture, and the tradition of the Church, inform us, to accomplish our calling?...

Today’s psalm, 27, is credited to King David... The Tuesday evening Bible study members have been working our way through First and Second Samuel. King David was a warrior for most of his life... We remember that David attacked and killed the giant Goliath, the Philistine. As King Saul tried to kill David over and over again, David and his band of rebels escape, and attack the neighbouring tribes. Later, after David becomes King of all Israel, he defends Israel and attacks Israel’s enemies... When David’s son Absalom, and also Sheba the Benjamineite, try to revolt, David the Warrior-King outmanouvers them...

We can also recall that one day, King David saw the woman Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah) bathing... David and Bathsheba sleep together; then she becomes pregnant; so David arranges for Bathsheba's husband Uriah to be killed by the Ammonites... There is a divine judgement against King David because of David's betrayal. The prophet Nathan proclaims:

'Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your [David's] house, because you have despised me [God], and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house...' (I Samuel 12: 10-11a)

So King David was fighting almost all his life – including members of his own family!...

David evidently has written Psalm 27 shortly after one of his battles – we don't know which one. It seems that it was a battle during which David was falsely accused. (King Saul wrongly accused David, when David was young.) Verse 12:

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,  
for false witnesses have risen against me,  
and they are breathing out violence.

False witnesses – liars – have been accusing David, and these liars are people of violence...

David has been under enormous pressure from his military enemies:

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—  
my adversaries and foes — they shall stumble and fall.  
Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;  
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. (vv. 2-3)

Amongst it all, David is determined to keep focused on *God*. David is confident that God will deliver him:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. [...]

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.  
(vv. 1, 4-5, 13a)

David seeks to know God, and to be taught by God:

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!  
'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'  
Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.

Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.  
(vv. 7, 11)

Amongst all the war, throughout all the bloodshed, against David's enemies and slanderers, David is determined here to keep looking to God, his Strength and his Shield...

Now, we can read Psalm 27 as a kind of history poem... But as we face war today, we can use Psalm 27 as a way to find our way through the *war* we are currently *facing* – most of all, between Russia and Ukraine (but affecting countries around the entire world)...

This is not an example of the world directing the Church... Instead, we are invited to consider how we can inform the world of God's best – for God's kingdom...

There is much which can be said, but let's focus on two over-arching principles in the Bible itself: First, while war within and among nations is a historical reality, our desire should always be to pursue the hard work of peace, and reconciliation... Even King David at the end of his life sees that the way of violence and destruction must end: "[People of violence] are utterly consumed with fire..." (II Samuel 23: 7b)

Writing perhaps after the Babylonian invasion and exile, a prophecy in Isaiah looks forward to peace and restoration:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to bring good tidings to the afflicted;  
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives...

They shall raise up the former devastations;  
They shall repair the ruined cities...

Violence and war take place. But that's not the final word: God's peace, God's *Shalom*, is the final word... That's an over-arching message in the Hebrew scriptures...

Second, Jesus Christ himself clearly taught and modelled a new way of living... In today's gospel reading, the Lord Jesus weeps for the peace of Jerusalem. At the time of his arrest, Jesus rebukes the disciple who uses a sword, and chooses the way of obedience (even to death on a cross). God's Messiah is not a political or military figure to overthrow the Romans... Jesus Christ, the Son of God, models a new way of living for all humanity, marked by love, and forgiveness, even in the hardest times... God's reign and rule established by the Lamb of God himself...

So, overall the Bible acknowledges the human reality of war, while God's best is always peace and reconciliation... This is shown supremely in Jesus Christ...

Christian tradition is a key instrument to help inform us – to help us live out the gospel... There has been a lot of amazing and thoughtful writing for 2000 years about war and peace. Let's look at just one example...

St. Thomas of Aquinas was a Christian genius, monk and philosopher in the 1200's... Thomas wrote 3 criteria (and these are still used by most Christians today):

Firstly, the war must be waged upon the command of heads of government, working together. (Thomas had no time for assassinating a political leader, or starting a civil war, because we don't like the leader we happen to have...)

Secondly, the war needs to be waged for just cause. We don't engage in war just because we feel like it might be fun! We want justice to be restored...

Thirdly, warriors must have the "right intent," – namely to promote good and to avoid evil. Tempting as it might be to hate an enemy, we need to have the right intentions in our hearts... (Do any of us remember when Archbishop Runcie raised eyebrows when he prayed for the best for the enemies of England during the Falkland Islands' war?...)

Later, Aquinas added that "violence must only be used as a last resort..." On the battlefield, violence was only justified to the extent it was necessary. Don't keep fighting the enemy once one side has conquered. Also, "soldiers needed to avoid cruelty..."

Lastly, Christian teachers list "proportionality." One doesn't use a grenade to kill a mosquito...

A consensus about the war in Ukraine is still developing. There is widespread but not universal condemnation of Russian aggression. While there are a handful of Christian voices who disagree with war at any time, most Christian moral thinkers believe that, during the attacks on Ukraine, Aquinas' criteria have been met. Christians in the Ukrainian army are justified in defending their country...

At the same time, *all of us* need to pray fervently for peace and for justice, and to contribute to humanitarian relief as we are able...

I'd like to point out that there's a little prayer station in the back of the Church building, to pray for Ukraine and the surrounding countries. Archbishop Anne has asked us to show our deep concern for Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, the refugees, and so on, in a week's time. More information is coming as soon as I know...

Let us offer a prayer composed for this current conflict:

God of peace and justice,  
we pray for the people of Ukraine today.  
We pray for peace and the laying down of weapons.  
We pray for all those who fear for tomorrow,  
That your Spirit of comfort would drawn near to them.  
We pray for those with power over war or peace,  
for wisdom, discernment and compassion to guide their decisions.  
Above all, we pray for all your precious children, at risk and in fear,  
that you would hold and protect them.  
We pray in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amen.