A new world is possible

Paul Oestreicher

The Opening Plenary at the World Council of Churches’ International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC), which took place in Kingston, Jamaica, 17-25 May 2011, was a cry for an end to was dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Salter, peacemaker, Quaker, lifelong servant of the Ecumenical Movement, staff member of the World Council of Churches and an initiator of the Decade to Overcome Violence and, therefore, of the Convocation.

Wherever you come from, whatever your church tradition, you may be Orthodox or Catholic, Protestant or Charismatic, Evangelical or Liberal, Conservative or Radical, all of us have come here because we wish to be friends of Jesus, rabbi, prophet and more than a prophet. To each one of us he says: You are my friends, if you do what I command you ... This I command you, to love one another as I have loved you. Is anyone, anywhere, excluded from that love? Here is the answer that Jesus gave to his friends: It is said ‘you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy; but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

That is how the Man in whom we see the face of God spoke, lived and died. As his enemies were killing him, he prayed for them to be forgiven. Jesus was not only speaking to each of us individually, he was addressing the people of God as a holy community. The prophets of Israel spoke to their nation. Often the nation did not want to hear.

Gathered together in Kingston from all corners of the earth, Jesus speaks to us now, to us, a small cross section of his sanctified people. Do we want to hear him? Our record suggests that we do not. Most of our theologians, pastors and assemblies, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant, have bowed down ever since the time of the Emperor Constantine in the third century, bowed down deeply to empire and nation, rather than to the single new humanity into which we are born. We have made a pact with Caesar, with power, the very pact that the early Christians called idolatry. Because the newly converted ruler declared it to be our duty, we have squared it with our conscience to kill the Emperor’s enemies, and to do this with Jesus on our lips.

Under the sign of the Cross, Christian nations have conquered and massacred the children of Islam. In 1914, my German father went to war with the words God with Us engraved on his belt buckle. The British soldiers whom he was trained to kill, had no doubt that the same God was on their side. When in 1945, a bomber set out, loaded with the world’s first nuclear weapon, a single weapon which was about to kill one hundred thousand women and children and men in the city of Hiroshima, the aircraft’s crew were sent on their way with Christian prayers. The war memorials in the cathedrals and cities of Christendom attest to the fact that we, like our brothers and sisters in Islam, regard those who have died in battle for the nation as having secured their place in heaven, and that now includes those in the coffins arriving from Afghanistan and draped in the “sacred” Stars and Stripes.

Unless we change, unless the Church moves to the margins and becomes the alternative society that unconditionally says no to war, no to the collective murder that every embattled nation or tribe, every warring alliance, every violent liberation movement, every fundamentalist cause, and now the War on Terror declares to be just, until we throw this justification of war, this “just war” theology into the dustbin of history, unless we do that, we will have thrown away the one unique ethical contribution that the teaching of Jesus could make both to the survival of humanity and to the triumph of compassion.
I commend to you Karen Armstrong’s highly significant Charter of Compassion. The Hindu prophet Mahatma Gandhi thought that Christianity would be a good idea – if only Christians practised it. If we were to show compassion for those whom we have good reason to fear, the new world that Jesus called the Kingdom would have come a little closer. That is within our power. Albert Schweitzer in his philosophy of civilisation simply called it: reverence for life.

**A plea for the abolition of war**

This Convocation will not yet be the Universal Christian Peace Council of which Dietrich Bonhoeffer dreamed, long before Hitler’s obedient servants hanged him. But we could help to pave the way to such a Council, a Council speaking with the authority of the whole Church, if, here and now in Kingston, we were ready to say: it is impossible both to love our enemies and to kill them, it is impossible both to reverence life and to be in league with the military-industrial complex, the killing-machine that rapaciously consumes levels of wealth that are beyond our mathematical imagination.

War and the arms trade that feeds it cannot make life for the people on our small planet more just or more secure. It is not simply that crimes are committed by all sides in every war. War itself is the crime. Its preparation alone, globally consumes more than a hundred times the resources that could provide clean water to every child on this planet. Even before the latest perversions of science and technology are put to their lethal use, thousands of children die unnecessarily for lack of clean water.

Jesus was not an idealistic dreamer. He was and remains the ultimate realist. The survival of our planet demands nothing less than the abolition of war. Albert Einstein, the great physicist and humanist, already knew that early in the last century. He repeated it often with a clarity and credibility that few Christian pacifists have matched.

The abolition of war is possible. It is as possible as was the abolition of slavery, the slavery that still haunts the history of this nation of Jamaica. Wilberforce and his evangelical friends who campaigned to end it were thought to be unrealistic dreamers. Slavery surely was part of our DNA, necessary to every society’s economic survival. The churches were up to their necks in maintaining slavery; the bishops of the Church of England unanimously upheld it. In the same way, many Christians are wedded to a society that cannot let go of the cult of the good soldier or even the holy warrior. Wilberforce and his determined friends triumphed against all odds. Slavery was made illegal. Its defenders withered away. That needs to become the fate of war. If the churches of the world fail to embark on such a campaign, we will have nothing of unique significance to say on the subject of world peace.

What are our chances of winning this battle? Some will say: slavery, exploitation, and trafficking in human beings still go on. Yes, but it is universally acknowledged as both morally wrong, and illegal. Passing legislation to abolish war will not immediately eliminate armed violence. What it will do is to make absolutely clear that to resolve conflicts by military means is illegal, with its perpetrators brought before an International Court of Justice.

Will we then remain in bondage to the principalities and powers, or will we wrestle with them and thereby enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God? This struggle, if we embrace it, will be at least as tough as that of Wilberforce. Devotion to and respect for every nation’s military tradition is as undiminished in church as in state. The Roman dictum: *si vis pacem, para bellum, if you want peace, prepare for war*, holds sway. It is a powerful lie. Yet those who believe it are neither stupid nor evil. History, however, shows that if we prepare for war, war is eventually what we get. Jesus put it quite simply: *Those who live by the sword, will die by the sword.*
Unless we learn to resolve our conflicts – and conflicts there will always be – unless we learn to resolve them without militarised violence, our children’s children may no longer have a future. Love of those who threaten us, care for the welfare of those whom we fear, is not only a sign of spiritual maturity, but also of worldly wisdom. It is enlightened self-interest. Military strategists glimpsed that when, in the Cold War they spoke of common security. If my potential enemy has no reason to fear me, I am safer too.

So, it is time for the still small voices of the historic peace churches, hitherto respected but ignored, to be taken seriously. That is the main reason why, as an Anglican priest, I have also chosen to be a Quaker, a member of the Religious Society of Friends. Quaker history, often a story of suffering, witnesses to the biblical insight that love casts out fear.

So, dear friends of Jesus, can we agree in Kingston to work for the day when the majority of our fellow human beings begin to see collective violence, to see war, in the same way as they see individual murder?

The world’s need for a “just peace”
At the moment war, once it starts, is held by most of our neighbours to be honourable, probably necessary, and sometimes noble. Language disguises the bloody, cruel reality. Heroes, it is said, lay down their lives for the nation. In reality they are trained, if possible, to stay alive and to kill the citizens of other nations. Armies, we are told, are there to protect our women and children. In real life, women and children are war’s first – and currently the numerically greatest number of - victims.

When – as in England a few weeks ago – a crown prince marries in a Christian cathedral, he is expected to wear full military regalia. Such symbols are powerful. That is the extent of our problem. Even when the Pope comes on a state visit, he is received, like every head of state, by soldiers carrying fixed bayonets that are designed to kill, rather than by children bearing flowers. His Holiness accepts the military rituals, as do practically all our churches. Do we even register the absurdity?

We are comfortable with military chaplains embedded with the men and women who are trained to kill. If they were a questioning, prophetic presence, they would undermine the cohesion and the morale on which every army depends. They are welcomed because they raise troops’ morale. The taxes I pay, though once I tried unsuccessfully not to, help to finance Britain’s Trident submarines. The sailors who man them have no right to disobey the order, if it were ever given, as it could be by a British prime minister, to commit genocide. They are conditioned to do the unthinkable in my name.

You will before long be left in no doubt that this Convocation is about the world’s need for a just peace. That is, I guess, what has brought us here. However, to speak of a more just peace would be nearer the truth. The struggle for greater justice will remain a task for every generation, for as long as human society exists. Our faith, our common humanity, our love for one another commits us to this struggle. But we should never give way to the mistaken assumption, as some Christians sadly do, that “until there is perfect justice, there cannot be peace”. Rather, peace, the rejection of collective violence, is a precondition for the world of tomorrow that will always need to be made more just. Killing each other can only undermine that task. To oppose evil with violence is to drive out the Devil with Beelzebub. It will not work.

I am under no illusion. The price to be paid for non-violent resistance to evil is as high as any soldier is expected to pay. Non-violent resistance to evil will never be a quick fix. It will call for long suffering and patience. It will be a living expression now of the new world that is not yet.

www.waccglobal.org
The Ploughshares Movement is one example of non-violent direct action against the symbols of modern warfare. Like the Berrigan brothers at the time of the Vietnam War, such peaceful resisters are prepared to break laws that protect the arsenals of violence. Juries may acquit them or may send them to prison. The fate of Jesus was worse, was fatal. When he angrily overturned the tables of the corrupt financial dealers in the Temple forecourt, challenging greed in league with priestly power, much like the bonus culture of today’s corrupt banking system, whose life did Jesus put at risk in that one-man demonstration? Only his own. How absurd then, that many Christians use this example of righteous anger to justify the violence of war, when in fact it demonstrates the very opposite.

What I have put before you in rather stark simplicity, is nevertheless deeply complex. Having spent my life studying politics, I do not believe that there is any room for pacifist self-righteousness. I have not come to Kingston to demonise those who choose the military option. They are part of us, the many and we the few. We must find ways of co-opting them into the peaceful struggle. The critics of principled non-violence are neither knaves nor fools. We must answer them wisely and patiently. They will rightly ask pacifists like me many serious questions: how, for example, is law and order to be maintained globally without heavily armed nations? On this point there is already good news. In the light of the last century’s history of unparalleled violence, international law is paving the way for genuine alternatives.

In theory, war is already largely outlawed. There are courts to try not only crimes committed in war, but the crime of war itself. But how are the laws of peace to be enforced? It is in their policing that there is still little experience. Yet there is some. When soldiers under United Nations command are trained, as police in our streets are trained, not to kill enemies, but to prevent or to end violent conflicts, we are already on the way to the new world. The great majority of the armed forces of New Zealand, my second home, are already engaged in the Pacific as peacekeepers, and are proud to be. Violence itself is their enemy. There is good news too in the experience that a critical mass of peaceful, unarmed people, often young people, from Leipzig to Cairo and beyond can bring down tyrannies. That ‘love is stronger than hate’ is, as Desmond Tutu often reminds us, a political as well as a spiritual truth.

When the still-young discipline of Peace Studies is given the same resources in the world’s universities that are given to Security Studies and the development of weapons systems, we will have made real progress. When women, raped and victimised in every war, are given an equal say in how we order our lives, we will have advanced even further. And with the military now recruiting women, will they be able to transform its rigidly patriarchal traditions?

Hardest of all, peace will demand the dethroning of the military-industrial complex. Dwight Eisenhower, America’s top World War II general and then its President, warned the American people shortly before his death of its insidious power, a late but not too late insight. Such a peace demands a seismic global rethink. Its organisation will be as demanding as the organisation of war. Every discipline will be involved: law, politics, international relations and economics, sociology, gender studies, personal and social psychology, and: last but, for us, not least, theology, the way we interpret the will of God.

Making our enemies our friends
There will always remain a dialectical tension between the struggle for justice, and the need to keep the struggle peaceful. We now know too that this new world will also depend on our
will and capacity to cherish and preserve the natural environment of which we are part. War desecrates and pillages nature and squanders its precious resources.

Yes to life means no to war. Humble men who can boast of no Nobel Peace Prize have paved the way. In the midst of patriotic fervour, they have simply said no. Let me tell you of two brave, wise farmers.

During the Second World War, Franz Jägerstätter defied Hitler’s command to take up arms. “Jesus forbids me to”. His “no” led straight to prison. A devout Catholic, his bishop came to visit him. “Franz, if you persist in your refusal, you will be executed. Surely you cannot do that to your wife and children?” His reply, “Bishop, do you want me to kill Russian husbands and fathers?” Franz was executed in 1944. His wife Franziska stood by him to the end. Franz was virtually disowned by his Church. Two generations later, a German Pope beatified him.

Archibald Baxter was a New Zealand farm labourer at the time of the First World War. He belonged to no church, but had diligently read the New Testament. In 1917, he refused to serve. They dragged him to the trenches in France, tortured and almost killed him, did all they could to break his will. They failed. He had no formal education, but his memoir We Will Not Cease (1939) has become a classic of peace literature. Defending his refusal to kill, Baxter replied to his critics: “The only lasting victory that we can win over our enemies is to make them our friends.”


Paul Oestreicher (PhD) directed the BBC’s “Church and Society” programme (1961-64) and was the British churches’ representative to the East European Council of Churches (1964-69). Early on he took an active part in the Christian Peace Conference and in 1964 was elected to the working committee of the Ecumenical Peace Meeting in Prague. He was the parish priest of Blackheath, London (1968-81) and leader of the British Council of Churches (1981-85). He has also been a member of the Society of Friends since 1983 and canon of Coventry Cathedral and head of its peace and reconciliation centre. He retired from the Cathedral in 1998, becoming its Canon Emeritus and became one of the chaplains in residence at the University of Sussex.