

## **Week 4: Tolerance, Reconciliation & Pacifism**

### **Why is there so little tolerance/reconciliation today?**



### **TOLERANCE : A SLIPPERY WORD!**

‘Tolerance’ sometimes seems as if it has become the mantra of the 21st century. The dictionary defines it as ‘the capacity to endure something, to treat with indulgence or forbearance the beliefs, actions or opinions of others’. But if you are a carpenter or an engineer, tolerance is ‘the permitted variation on a measurement’. Too great a variation is not, therefore, to be tolerated.

It seems to me there is a lot of muddled thinking and use of language around this issue, and it is important to be clear: especially as today we face more challenges, both from living in an increasingly secular society and mixing with a far wider range of nationalities and cultures.

Fear and lack of understanding of difference can leave us feeling threatened and insecure, as values once accepted as the norm are suddenly sidelined. Years ago, I worked for a Christian organisation opposite Balham Station in London: and I could look out of the window and count a dozen different nationalities, most of whom probably wouldn’t have shared my Christian beliefs. But that was fine: it was on the whole a happy, peaceful area because we all respected one another’s beliefs and lifestyle. But the balance has shifted. It is more likely now that jobs are seen to be threatened and different cultures form their own neighbourhoods.

And is respect the same as tolerance? Or can we continue to respect someone’s right to make their own choices, but refuse to condone or be implicated in the results of those choices? Are there departures from the God-given standards which Christians seek to observe which are simply too great to be tolerated? If so, what, in such instances, should be our response?

One thing is clear: we cannot impose our views. This was the road to the inquisition. More than ever today, people resist authority from above, and in any case persuasion, not force is God's way:

'Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord' (Isaiah 1:18).

We need, with sensitivity, to persuade people of the truth of the gospel, respecting their conscience and freedom of choice.

But the opposite of imposing our values is a laissez-faire attitude: the extreme tolerance which says that 'anything goes'. Surely that cannot be right - for Christians to stand by when God's truth and laws are flouted? Many would point to Nazi Germany and remember the saying that 'the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity'. And actually, few if any really believe that 'anything goes'. Even those who shout loudest for tolerance will be quick to allocate blame, be it for paedophiles, fraudsters, rapists - or those who hold strong convictions contrary to their own (as seen in recent court cases relating to Christian conscience). The truth is, whatever we say, we all have limits as to how far our tolerance will stretch.

## **RECONCILIATION : A SAVING WORD**

When tolerance is no longer possible and relationships break down, what then? Walk away down that broad road that leads to bitterness, disillusion, blame and a hardening of attitudes? Or persevere along the challenging narrow road of understanding, forgiveness and true reconciliation? The trouble is, it's all too easy to walk away, because of the individualism that is so widespread today. We fail to see that we all need each other - unlike the popular African response to the question 'Who am I?' which is 'I am because we are'.

True reconciliation - not just a papering over the cracks - is quite a challenge. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the 1990s identified four key components: truth, mercy, justice and peace. All are important:

'Truth without mercy is blinding and raw; mercy without truth is a cover-up and superficial. Justice without peace falls easily into cycles of bitterness and revenge;

benefits only the privileged or the victors.'

Why isn't there more reconciliation today? Because it's hard work:

because in an era of so-called post-truth - if my truth is as good as yours - why would anyone admit to being wrong? And if we don't know of the love and forgiveness of God, how would we dare to admit we were wrong? - it would leave us too exposed and vulnerable. Because we confuse forgiving with condoning. Because we are encouraged to think more about our rights than our responsibilities; because we don't realise we need each other. Because we forget, or never knew, that reconciliation is a key part of our Christian calling. Who was it who said 'Never take a reference from a clergyman: they always want to give everyone a second chance'...? So, of course, does God.

## **PACIFISM : A PERPLEXING WORD**

Of course we all want to live in peace, to live and let live. No one wants war, which never determines who was right, only who was left...

But what are we to do when there is evil or danger that cannot be tolerated? When there are differences that cannot be reconciled?

What would Jesus do - was he a pacifist?

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus tells us we are to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us and pray for those who persecute us. He practised what he preached, and never suggested rebelling against the Roman occupation. And in his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul tells us to be subject to the governing authorities, for they are God's servants. All of this would indicate that in our personal relationships we are indeed to be 'pacifist'.

But what of God's endorsement of war in the Old Testament, and the fact that Paul sees the State as God's agent to punish evil and wrong-doing? Jesus does not engage with the debate at this level, and many Christians would accept that, in extreme circumstances, war may be inevitable.

According to this 'just war' tradition, there are three main criteria:

- 1 Its cause must be righteous: it must be defensive, not aggressive; must seek to secure justice or protect the innocent; must be undertaken as a last resort and after a formal declaration by a legitimate authority.
- 2 Its means must be controlled, i.e. proportionate and discriminate; civilian immunity must be preserved as far as possible, as laid down by the Geneva Conventions and United Nations.
- 3 Its outcome must be predictable, i.e. there must be a realistic prospect of victory, of achieving the just cause for which it was undertaken.

This is a complex issue, and Christians will differ in their response.

Some will feel it is legitimate to fight, given the above conditions.

Others will agree to participate in a just war in a non-combatant role.

Others will opt to be conscientious objectors, and face the accusation of allowing others to do the dirty work for them. There will always be questions as to which is the lesser of the evils: a war, or a take-over by a malign power. There is also the fact that many of our modern weapons - nuclear or chemical - cannot possibly be discriminate.

Jeremy Corbyn's stance on nuclear weapons has raised again the question of whether there is value in keeping them purely for their deterrent value: will they deter, unless others believe we would really use them?

## CONCLUSION

There will be wars: Jesus said so. Few of us, thankfully, will be involved in decision-making about undertaking a war. Some of us may have to make choices about our involvement in a war. But all of us will make daily choices as to how we practise a right tolerance of others, how we respond when there are things we should not tolerate, and how we can be agents of reconciliation in all our relationships. This is God's heart: and he will strengthen us with his Holy Spirit to be people of peace.



Any Questions' Sermon Series