



**Sermon by David Walker, Bishop of Manchester, at FoR centenary service
St Mary the Virgin University Church, Oxford on 17th January 2015**

Our reading from St Luke a few minutes ago described Jesus entering into Jerusalem. He wept over a city that even though its name described it as a place of peace didn't know what would really make for its peace. I was in Jerusalem myself just a few weeks ago, for the first time in my life. Whilst it was wonderful to visit so many holy sites, it was no more peaceful in 2014 than it was 2000 years ago. We took refuge in a Franciscan church one morning whilst we heard the noise of firecrackers and military weaponry just a few metres away from us, as young Palestinians clashed with the Israeli Armed Forces. Later that same day I breathed in teargas for the first time, when I was caught up in an attack at a tram stop in the centre of the city. Into other incidents that same day people simply waiting for their tram to arrive were killed when vehicles were driven into the queues.

You don't need to be caught up in armed and violent conflict to understand the urgent need for peacemaking, but it helps!

The Fellowship of Reconciliation began 100 years ago just as Europe was plunging itself once again into war. My grandfather, though he must've been extremely young at the time, fought in that war. Some of my earliest memories are of him as an old man, suffering from serious mental illness, as the effects of what he had seen, and what he had taken part in, so many years previously, came back to haunt him. A large part of the final year or two of his life was spent in a mental hospital somewhere near Stockport. I remember visiting him there with my grandma and my parents.

You don't have to see the life-long damage caused by war in your own family members, in order to understand the urgent need for peacemaking, but it helps!

The UK, it has to be said, remains a pretty safe country for most of us most of the time. Whilst there may be a heightened sense of risk from terrorism, I can recall as a teenager living through the height of the IRA bombing campaign in mainland Britain. Nevertheless, what happens here, now just as much as in the 1970s, is attributed to what has been done by way of military action, in the name of our country and its perceived allies, elsewhere. Whether it be Ireland just across a short body of water, or the Middle East, much further away.

You don't have to make that link between what is done in the name of our country far away and what then occasionally is brought home to our own streets in order to understand the urgent need for peacemaking, but it helps!

So thank you for what you are, thank you for what you do, and thank you for having done it consistently for 100 years, often in the teeth of public opinion. A radically pacifist approach has never been at the mainstream of British public life, and may never be so, but you hold an important part of the debate. You keep all of us thinking about both the impact of conflict and the urgency of making peace. You challenge what G K Chesterton famously spoke of in his hymn as, "the lies of tongue and pen" to which most human beings for much of the time remain enthralled.

So let me encourage you to go on with the task of radical peacemaking as you begin your second century. And as I do so, let me draw upon the privilege you have given me in allowing me to address you today, to suggest some of the key aspects of that peacemaking which will be necessary for the 21st-century.

Tackling the causes of war

The twentieth century saw the causes of war shifting from imperial ambition, to economic markets, and then on to natural resources, in particular oil. A few months ago I met with the Chief Fire Officer for Greater Manchester. First he showed me the latest technological advancements that would allow his officers to put out fires faster, and with less risk to their lives and safety than ever before. Then he explained that less and less of his firefighters' work is about putting fires out. Their primary focus has moved to preventing them from happening in the first place. He would rather have staff fitting smoke detectors in people's homes and reminding us to be careful with the chip pan than extinguishing blazes.

Seeking to prevent wars happening may well continue to include time honoured methods. There will always be a place interventions like the mass marches that attempt to forestall specific conflicts, as people did in their millions during the run up to the disastrous Iraq War of 2003. But how much better it is to come into the debate earlier. If the wars for access to natural resources in the last century focussed on oil, it is likely that in the current century the attention will shift to safe and secure supplies of water. A few weeks ago I walked down to the shores of the Dead Sea. It's a slightly longer stroll than it was historically. The level of the sea has dropped alarmingly over recent years, as an increasing amount of the water that used to reach it is now being extracted further up the river, in order to irrigate recent settlements.

I know that you are keen to make Climate Change a thrust of your work this year. I would wish to endorse that as strongly as I can. It is also a major focus of the Ethical Investment Advisory Group of the Church of England, on which I sit.

Challenging the methodology of war

We are sold a myth about war nowadays. We are encouraged to see it as something that, even when it involves our own nation's military, is more akin with a computer game than real life. Guided missiles and drones take out targets with apparently no cost on our side. And if occasionally the wrong target is hit, then that is written off in the weasel words "collateral damage". Yet when our casual attitude to the consequences of our warfare are cited by terrorists as the grounds for their radicalisation and their atrocities, we act shocked and surprised.

Nuclear weapons have, to pick an ironic metaphor, largely dropped off the radar in recent times. But that doesn't mean the fight for their elimination needs to be slackened. The same goes for biological and advanced chemical weaponry. The public narrative may have moved away from these towards the much more low technology battles fought with Kalashnikovs and suicide bombing attacks, but the challenge to advanced weaponry needs to remain firm.

And let me invite you to consider a new priority. It was announced very recently that the latest joint war games between the UK and the USA are to focus on cyber attacks. The two countries will simulate attacks on each other's systems and then seek to defend those assaults. They will learn a great deal about their defensive capabilities and robustness. They will also learn to hone their skills for potential future attacks against others. Don't be fooled for a moment into imagining that cyber warfare only has virtual casualties. If major computer systems go down then lives, many lives, are put at risk.

Highlighting the human impact of war

A few years ago friend of mine was working as the chaplain at hospital ward which was the main UK location for treating service personnel who had been injured on the battlefield. It was a posting that nobody was expected to remain in for more than a maximum of about eighteen months, because the demands of spending every day with young military casualties and their families was just too much. Many of them had experienced life changing injuries. Some wished they had died on the battlefield rather than come home as badly and permanently scarred and maimed as they were. The distress, frustration and anger reached deep into their families: parents, fiancées, friends. The chaplain was often the only person on hand to soak up this emotional tidal wave.

UK squaddies are not the enemies of the reconciliation movement, more often they are the victims of war. In a few months' time we will commemorate in Manchester Cathedral the centenary of one particular day when many hundreds of young men from Salford were killed going over the top of their First World War trench. Today, as it was a hundred years ago, most young people don't join up because they want to kill and maim others, and certainly they don't join up because they want to be maimed or killed themselves. They come from the poorest communities, where the life choices are the most limited. Military service offers them the potential of a way out.

Their stories need to be told and heard. Many of us are old enough to remember the attempts made by political leaders to prevent those who had been wounded in the Falklands Islands from marching in the end of war commemoration. I was honoured to be present at Manchester University recently when Simon Weston, who suffered disfiguring wounds in that conflict, was awarded an honorary degree. Try to make alliances with the charities and bodies that support wounded service personnel on issues you can work together on. At the same time you can respect the fact that you may have profound differences from these organisations on other issues.

A final word from my schooldays

The Grammar School I went to in Manchester took a very unusual line. All boys were taught history but none of us was ever entered for the O Level exam. The school didn't like the examination curriculum offered. We learned about the history of our city and its people. We discovered how, in 1819, when the men who had returned from the Napoleonic Wars to massive unemployment went with their families to plead with the city authorities, they were mown down by the militia in what came to be known as the Peterloo massacre. When we came to study the First World War we paid no attention to the dates and places of battle, nor to the generals who commanded and their tactics. Instead we learned the songs of protest and lament that the men in the trenches composed and sang. And we learned the poems of men such as Owen and Sassoon. We discovered something of what the experience of war was really like. Those history lessons helped me to understand what my grandad had been through. Why the final years of his life had been as they were.

And why peacemaking remains as urgent today as when his generation were being massacred in Flanders fields.