

## Homily for The Third Sunday of Lent (Year C)(07/03/2010)

This week I want to deal with quite a common accusation, namely that religion causes violence. Sometimes the man in the pub or the dinner party bore will say something like 'All wars have been caused by religion'. Occasionally religion is compared unfavourably with science, as in the saying that was common a year or two back 'science flies people to the moon, religion flies planes into the side of buildings'. Generally speaking such simple statements are intended to hide the truth rather than to reveal it; lets not forget that in 1945 planes also flew over two Japanese cities and dropped bombs that had been carefully and deliberately designed by scientists to kill as many people as possible, leaving perhaps a quarter of a million people dead. Science can be used to do terrible things, just as religion can be used as an excuse for some terrible things.

Once again let me repeat, I have no intention of defending religion in general. I will happily talk about the Catholic Church, but if you want to talk about the part violence plays in other religious traditions, you'll have to get them to stand up for themselves. We will have to begin by admitting that in the course of history some Catholics, including clergy and indeed popes, have used violence, sometimes justifying it on religious grounds. I suppose realistically it would be surprising if this were not so: the Church is made up of sinful individuals, prone to being corrupted by power. They were also men and women of their age; to expect people of the thirteenth century, or of the fifteenth, to behave like people of the twenty-first century would be absurd. Few of us would choose to live in those past times, we are happy where we are. So the first question must be, what does our Catholic faith have to tell us about violence and conflict?

Lets begin with the Catechism. That will tell us the Church's position. It acknowledges that it is legitimate to renounce all violence, but goes on to say that while all citizens and governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war, governments have the right to defend themselves once all efforts to resolve disputes peacefully have failed [CCC 2306-7, quoting *Gaudium et Spes* n79]. However, great care must be taken that any decision to fight is morally defensible, and during the course of conflict people must act morally, that is to say, for example genocide or the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities with their inhabitants is indefensible: 'The mere fact that war has regrettably broken out does not mean that everything becomes licit between the warring parties' [CCC 2312 quoting *Gaudium et Spes* n79]. Factors such as injustice, inequality, envy, distrust and pride which contribute to causing wars must be reduced if possible [CCC 2317]. So the official teaching of the Church is clear. War must be avoided if possible, but in extreme circumstances it is permissible, although even then individual actions must be rigorously tested against a universal standard of morality.

That is all very well, says the man in the pub, but what about the crusades, or the killing that went along with the Reformation, or the Wars of Religion, or the Spanish Inquisition, or the conflict in Northern Ireland? Whatever the theory, it seems in practice that Christians end up resolving disputes with violence. Let me make a couple of preliminary points before looking at some of those specific issues. The first is that, while it is quite easy to come up with a list of violent conflicts that were apparently caused by religious disputes, by definition it is much harder to come up

with a list of all the conflicts and disagreements that were settled without recourse to violence. We produce a list of disagreements that lead to conflict, and then we deduce that therefore all disagreements lead to conflict, but this is not the case; those that were resolved peacefully disappear into the anonymity of history. The second point is that, while there is something rather distasteful about trading numbers of victims, the point must be made that the atheist regimes of the Twentieth Century were for the most part soaked in blood. Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, Pol Pot's Cambodia, all turned killing into an industrial process. Some atheists try to dismiss this by saying that Nazism and Communism are sort of 'Godless religions' so they actually show how violent religion is and have nothing to do with atheism. This argument won't do at all; the fact is that where religion is rejected some other narrative must be found to be the basis for a society, and those which atheists chose in the last century were vicious and bloody. When atheists then say that these regimes just show that some atheists are bad, not that all atheists are bad, we might be prepared to accept that (although the Twentieth Century fails to provide any benevolent atheist regimes) so long as they will then accept that some bad Christian leaders simply mean that human beings are frail, and the more powerful they are the more prone they are to abuse their position.

As I have said before, Christianity is at its most vulnerable when it is too closely allied to secular power, as then it is in most danger of being corrupted (although there are some notable examples of wise and holy Christian rulers, even some who have become saints). Pope John Paul II realised this, and as a part of his great drive for reconciliation in the Jubilee Year 2000 he said this:

*"Let us forgive and ask forgiveness! While we praise God who, in his merciful love, has produced in the Church a wonderful harvest of holiness, missionary zeal, total dedication to Christ and neighbour, we cannot fail to recognize the infidelities to the Gospel committed by some of our brethren, especially during the second millennium. Let us ask pardon for the divisions which have occurred among Christians, for the violence some have used in the service of the truth and for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions."*(Homily Sunday March 12<sup>th</sup> 2000)

Let's look at some of those specific allegations aimed at The Church. What about the crusades? Aren't they a pretty unpleasant episode in Christian history? The crusades represent a very complex bundle of historical events, which span almost 200 years, beginning in 1091. It is impossible to do justice to something so complex in a few words. The spark which ignited the crusades was a request from the Byzantine Empire for help defending itself against the Turks who were invading from the East. There was a real fear of invasion (don't forget, 300 years earlier arab invaders had come as far as Poitiers). There was some legitimate justification at that stage, and many of the crusaders were genuinely intending to set out and rescue people from oppression and violence; to portray the crusaders, at least at this early stage, as aggressors is simply perverse. We refer to a series of wars as 'the crusades', but in reality it is a very mixed succession of campaigns, sometimes well-intentioned and undertaken at great personal cost, sometimes hijacked by adventurers and booty-hunters. It was convenient to give these wars a religious purpose, and no doubt some people believed they were acting from the best of motives: to set the captive free. For many, however, holy war was a disguise to give some respectability to their real motives. This is a

vitaly important point, because using faith to give a veneer of respectability to violence, the true motives of which are much darker, is a practice has persisted from generation to generation. The fact is that the crusades were a mixed bag, sometimes having more to do with barbarian culture and sentimental chivalry than the gospel itself, and The Church quite rightly regrets the part it played in permitting and promoting the excesses of these bloody episodes.

Well, what about the Spanish Inquisition then? Here we come to one of the great bogeymen of Protestant historians. Everyone has heard of the Spanish Inquisition, everyone has the general impression that it was something dark and dreadful, almost no-one knows anything much about it. Clearly an Inquisition that tortures and kills people is not a good thing, although it is now generally accepted that the numbers executed by the Inquisition were much smaller than had once been claimed, perhaps 3000 over its 250 year history. Just to put that in context, that is about 8 or 10 a year; last year (2009) the State of Texas executed 24 people, more than twice as many. The fact that priests were involved in the inquisition is clearly reprehensible, but it is absolutely wrong to think of the Inquisition as a Church organisation. The clue is in the title; this was primarily a Spanish State institution, operating in support of the Crown. Although the Pope originally authorised the Inquisition, he was shocked by its excesses and repeatedly tried to rein it in, but was prevented from doing so when the State took total control. At the time the Inquisition was founded Ferdinand and Isabella had just united Aragon and Castile, and taken back the South of Spain from Moorish control. Enforcing religious orthodoxy was, for them, about promoting peace, unity and security in a newly created nation. The Spanish Inquisition was about promoting state power and control; if some religious people became involved in it, that tells us that secular power tends to corrupt faith, and that the Church includes sinners, both of which we already knew. The activities of the Inquisition illustrate for us that the early modern state, which claimed total power over its people, was capable of great brutality. This was to be seen again in the so-called wars of religion which divided Europe after the Reformation. Although ostensibly about religion, these wars were actually about newly powerful nation states flexing their muscles. They were really about power.

This brings me back to the point that when war or violence is attributed to religion, this is almost always a cover for something else. People are usually fighting about power, about who will have power over who. This, in fact, was what lay behind the apparent religious conflict in Northern Ireland. It was really a struggle for power, that it was convenient to blame on religion. When people say that religion lies behind most wars, they are being astonishingly naive. People will always find something to fight over. Usually it is power, but it may be money, or food, or land, or oil, or water, or any number of things. Human beings are sinful, and prone to violence. The Church, which is made up of human beings, has not been immune from this. The more closely our leaders are linked to secular leaders, the more danger there is of becoming complicit in violence. The fact that Catholics have been involved in violence in the course of history tells us that they were sinners, who failed to live up to the Christian ideal. Christianity explicitly restricts the use of force in very tight boundaries, and the fact that in past generations people have lost sight of that shows us no more than that they were imperfect, which we already knew. As G K Chesterton once said: *'Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried'*.

Questions to Consider/Discuss

1. What causes violence?
2. "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." (Lord Acton) Discuss!!
3. What circumstances justify war?
4. 'Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried'. (Chesterton) Was Chesterton right?
5. 'Religion causes wars' How will you respond to this statement?