

John: 11: 9-10 “Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”

Jesus and the Just War

We Episcopalians, even in Lent, tend to like re-affirming sermons. We have enough insight to know that we could do better. But, all things considered, we are already pretty damn good. After all, we do belong to the Episcopal Church! We know a bit of scripture; in our larger churches we relish the bells and smells of a “proper” service. Sometimes, if we have a choice, we attend such a “high church” that we get nose bleeds.

We are good followers of Jesus. At least until we are tasked with the job of following Jesus out the door. Remember the old story of the rather racist old timer who was told by the priest that “all God’s children, meant black and brown ones too.” The old man said: Father, you were preachin, now you are meddlin”. Well friends, get ready for some meddlin.

Killing people has always presented a problem to the institutional church. It never was a problem for Jesus as reflected in the writings of the gospels, we were to love our enemies. Today Christians easily say that they are in favor of peace, but they also easily say that they are in favor of a specific war. The Episcopal church is not immune to this dilemma. As an eight year old, my first introduction to the Episcopal Church was when my Uncle Charles, on leave during WWII, took me to the Episcopal Church for Sunday service. Uncle Charles was a general and most general officers were affiliated with the Episcopal church, and this had been the custom since the American Revolution. Several denominations are currently active among general officers.

The church in service of war was an issue noted early on by Christian writers. In the fourth and fifth centuries Ambrose and Augustine faced this problem by formulating the first just war theory. The writings were to act as a guide to rulers helping them to decide whether they were in violation of Christian ethics as they contemplated weighing war.

Today the United States is in a de facto war with three countries: Venezuela, Cuba and Iran. Looking only at the most devastating of these wars, Iran, let us note the just war ethical principles. Although the Episcopal Dictionary of the Church lists seven elements to consider prior to waging war, I will just touch on three, the first of which is *just cause*. Self defense and the protection of innocent life form the basis of just cause. General Tillis, Secretary of Defense in Trump’s first administration, claims that this criterion is met because Iran’s surrogates killed American troops in a variety of situations spanning the past forty some years. The problem is knowing what constitutes independent action and what is surrogate action. Given the turmoil of the region, it is difficult to trace lines of responsibility.

A second criterion is *right intention*. The aim of the war must be to establish a just peace, not revenge, power, or economic gain. While the aims of the conflict are murky, the same economic concerns that moved the UK and the US to destroy Iranian democracy in 1953 would seem to be operative today.

The final criterion for a just war that we will note is that of *last resort*. All peaceful alternatives (diplomacy, sanctions) must have been exhausted. The U.S. was moving aircraft and ships into attack position, even as negotiations were on going. During the final week of talks, Iran made two proposals that were not considered by the U.S. The first was to add a chemical contaminant to the refined uranium that would make it unusable for bomb making. The second was to give away all of their enriched uranium to agreed upon third parties. Instead of further negotiations the U.S. joined Israel in a massive bombing campaign which resulted in the deaths of many women, children and non-combatants.

It is difficult to see how anyone with ethical sensibilities could label Iran a just war. It is particularly offensive that the Secretary of Defense calls the war one ordained by God. No greater blasphemy exists than to shed blood in God's name.

We walked through the darkness and have stumbled. It is incumbent upon Episcopalians to seek the light of Christ and to walk with Jesus, out the church door and into His world, to spread love and peace, to the best of our abilities.

Amen.