

**Second Sunday of Advent 2015 (Evensong)**

**Isaiah 40: 1 – 11; Luke 1: 1 – 25**

The vote in the House of Commons on Wednesday night will probably determine the course of British foreign policy and international real politic for the next 15 to 20 years. So I thought it might be appropriate to make some comments by way of reflection on how we should respond to it. It would, of course, be an abuse of my position to stand here and seek to persuade you either to support or condemn air strikes in Syria; and I hope that nothing I say will be understood to be partisan - that is not my intention. In fact the way that 67 Labour MPs voted with the government, and a dozen or so Tory MPs actually defied the party whip, shows that this is an issue which transcends party politics and on which reasonable people can disagree. My intention is merely to assist us to reflect on that fact that we are now making air strikes on targets in Syria - as, in fact, we have been doing on targets south of the Syrian border, in Iraq, for two years.

The first thing to bear in mind is that Christians do accommodate the expediency of war within a conscientious profession of faith. In my sermon two weeks ago, which might be criticised for being more of a stream of consciousness than a worked through sermon, I was exploring whether we can, with any integrity, do that and at the same as trot out the slogan that Christ is King. The reality is that we find, in practice, we can only allow Christ to exercise qualified sovereignty in our lives as we negotiate a dual citizenship of the Kingdom of God together with living in society as we find it around us.

The compromise that comes out of that negotiation is that for 1700 years Christians have conceded that, whereas we would have to forsake war if it were unambiguously true that Christ is our King, in practice it is impracticable to do so. And that means that the best we can do is hedge around when it is just to go to war by demanding that strict criteria are met. They are:

1. War is only justified to resist aggression which is lasting, grave and certain.
2. All other means of putting it to an end must have been exhausted.
3. There must be a serious prospect of success.
4. It must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.

It's the second Sunday in Advent. It's the Sunday we traditionally associate with the role of the prophets in preparing for the coming of Christ's reign of justice and peace. Specifically, this evening, we have heard the role of the prophet described as someone who has the spirit of Elijah upon them; someone who turns the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; and who recognises that true might is exercised with gentle care, like a shepherd's.

If we are to be prophetic in the way we observe a holy Advent; if we are to be prophetic in the way we prepare

to receive the Christ-child, we need to keep those criteria of the just war theory at the forefront of our minds. Because if any of us feels those criteria were transgressed in the House of Commons on Wednesday night, that person has a prophetic duty to speak out. And if we feel those criteria were made out before the debate on Wednesday, we still have a prophetic duty to speak out if they subsequently become transgressed as the conflict escalates.

So that's the first thing to bear in mind: we have a just war theory; what the conditions of that theory demand; and our prophetic duty to apply them.

The second thing to bear in mind is that we must pray for the consciences of our MPs which are now burdened by the responsibility for Wednesday's decision; and for the consciences of members of the RAF which are now burdened by responsibility for its implementation. We've got to be careful about this. It's not a back-handed way of condemning the

decision. Even if we all approve of the decision, it still leaves our MPs and RAF with blood on their hands. Because even if killing is justified, it's always wrong. That's not a contradiction: it's just complex. The mediaevals got this; but we don't.

That's why cathedrals are full of recumbent effigies of crusaders in chapels dedicated to saying masses for their souls. That's why King Henry V, when he set out on the campaign that culminated in Agincourt, set aside money for the Canons of Bridlington Priory to say masses for his soul, in the church, if he should die in battle. There has never been anybody more assured of the justification of his cause than Henry V, but even he recognised that his soul was in peril because of what that just cause led him to do.

And, however blood thirsty the mediaevals may seem to us, they displayed a spiritual sensitivity that was entirely absent on Wednesday night when members, on both sides of the House, indulged in the shameful,

stomach turning orgy of cheering for bombing people in Syria. Christians may be satisfied that war is justified; but there can never be any place for self-righteousness in the Christian conduct of war. Rather there needs to be a humble awareness of our absolute dependence on the mercy of God as we negotiate that compromise between the standards of his kingdom and our accommodation to this world's reality.

Only last week a former soldier was speaking to me confessionally – not in formal confession, but speaking to me as a priest – about the irreparable spiritual wound he has continuously suffered since the first time he killed someone. There can be no doubt that the killing was lawful and justified, but the responsibility for it has ruptured that soldier's soul. That is why our MPs and RAF need our prayers, because they risk their souls for us.

Those cheering MPs managed somehow to sanitise themselves – perhaps by their cheering - from that

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awful truth. We need protecting from that sanitisation of war and ever to be mindful of the actual cost of it; the cost to all parties; and the cost to those so euphemistically described as collateral damage.

This is how we observe a holy Advent. This is the extent of the mercy on which we rely as we prepare to look the defenceless Christ-child in the eye this Christmas.

Amen.