

In 2004 Friends were invited to contribute a sermon to an ecumenical service. What was written then seems very relevant to the present conflict in Israel/Palestine. The text below is what was delivered then, reproduced without any changes.

Revenge and reconciliation

A sermon for the United Nations Association

I have been thinking about two different pieces of news which were reported recently.

Immediately after the massacre in Beslan a local leader said, *“Of course there will be revenge. People must take their revenge, it is their right.”*

The other news is more local. Jo Tufnel has met again with Patrick Magee who bombed the Brighton Grand Hotel 20 years ago, killing her father Sir Anthony Berry. She said,

“Over the past two and a half years of getting to know Pat, I feel I’ve been recovering some of the humanity I lost when that bomb went off. Pat is also on a journey to recover his humanity. I know that he sometimes finds it hard to live with the knowledge that he cares for the daughter of someone he killed through his terrorist actions.

Perhaps more than anything I’ve realised that no matter which side of the conflict you’re on, had we all lived each others lives, we could all have done what the other did. In other words, had I come from a Republican background, I could easily have made the same choices Pat made.”

As we enter the 21st century we are a long way from ending war and terrorism, and we have to decide how we should respond to violence. The United Nations Charter recognises the rights of nations to defend themselves against aggression, but nowhere does it sanction revenge as a response to injury. I believe that in many parts of the world the distinction between legitimate defence and revenge has become blurred, and that in some parts of the world revenge has become an instrument of policy.

We are here today because we believe in the work of the United Nations and because we believe that Christian insights should determine the ways in which we seek to influence the political world.

The Bible doesn’t contain much direct advice about the best way to conduct international relations, although it frequently tells us about what happens when they fail. It has a lot to say about justice and individual morality, and surely the same principles which guide us individually should also apply in national and international affairs.

This morning I would like us to consider a seemingly unpromising text which can be found in several places in the Bible, *“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”* (Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deut 19:21, Matt 5:38). This text had probably been passed down orally for centuries before it was written down at some time between about 1400BC and 750BC. *“An eye for an eye”* was not just part of the law of Moses, but it was also part of the law of other eastern peoples, including the Babylonians.

Many people believe that the principle of *“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”* is so logical and just that it is beyond question.

Others think that the literal interpretation of *“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”* is barbaric. The idea that an injury should be revenged by physically mutilating another person is, fortunately, something which English law and culture have rejected, and a law which seems to permit this sounds like a relic of the Middle Ages or even more primitive times.

It is very easy to misinterpret the Bible by taking texts out of context, and if we are to make sense of “*An eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth*”, we would do well to look at the whole body of the law of which this is a small part. This was actually one of the great steps forward for civilisation as it laid down some principles about how to respond to injury, and I believe that the world has not yet fully accepted those principles.

What did the Mosaic law say?

1. Retaliation was not the right of individuals, but of the whole community. In other words it was brought within the scope of the law.
2. Retribution was due only from the person who caused the injury.
3. Retaliation was to be limited. It meant that if someone killed one of your sheep you were not entitled to wipe out his entire flock – or kill his herdsman, or his tribe.
4. Retribution was to be proportionate to the damage done.
5. Retribution was not to be interpreted literally in terms of doing harm, but in seeking compensation.
6. The community had to protect offenders from unlawful revenge.

The Bible is very explicit about some of these principles, while others have to be drawn out from the context.

We can find a good argument against physical retribution in Shakespeare’s play, *The Merchant of Venice*. Antonio had no collateral to offer for a loan, and foolishly he signed a contract with Shylock. Of course the money was lost, and Shylock tried to enforce his contract which entitled him to take a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Portia was appointed arbitrator, and she dismayed almost everyone by declaring that Shylock really was entitled to his pound of flesh. Then, in a cunning twist she reminded him that the contract did not entitle him to a single drop of blood, nor to Antonio’s life.

The Rabbis of the first century were well ahead of Shakespeare. The practice of paying compensation rather than taking physical revenge seemed to go against the letter of the law, and they debated about how “*an eye for an eye*” should be interpreted. They believed that the payment of compensation was enough to satisfy the law because it was impossible to remove an eye without endangering a life.

It was important to protect offenders from individual revenge. The law required three “*cities of refuge*” to be created where offenders would be safe from revenge, and with careful forethought it was stated that if Israel’s territory increased, new cities of refuge should be created, so that everyone was within convenient travelling distance of at least one. Deuteronomy says, in the case of manslaughter, “If the distance is too great, the avenger of blood in hot pursuit might pursue and overtake and put the killer to death, even when a death sentence was not deserved.”

How do these principles apply today?

First of all, at one time nations were free to revenge themselves against other nations as they chose. International law has developed which makes revenge illegal, but as yet there are few adequate ways to enforce this law.

Collective punishments and retribution against non-combatants are now forbidden by international law and the Geneva Convention.

Retribution may be required as part of a peace settlement, but only in terms of proportionate compensation, and not inflicted as a disproportionate punishment.

Finally, there should be adequate and efficient provision for asylum, protecting not only the innocent, but also protecting the guilty from unlawful revenge.

I believe that every one of those principles has been broken in many places throughout the world in recent years, especially in the Israel-Palestine dispute, and in the response to 9/11. **If the nations of the world would only adhere to the principles of the Old Testament, ideals spelled out 3,000 years ago, the modern world would be a better place.**

So far I have considered only the Old Testament, and the Christian will want to look further.

Jesus taught, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to take your coat, give your cloak as well. ... I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

This teaching of Jesus is extremely challenging. It is easy to raise objections to it. For a start it seems unjust, because it doesn't punish the wrongdoer, it does nothing to deter further wrongdoing, and some would say that it rewards aggression. Did Jesus expect all of his followers to obey this, or was this simply addressed to his disciples, or to the seventy? Is this just advice for saints and fools, or is it a commandment which applies to all of us? I will avoid the difficult area of defence against aggression, and comment only on how we should respond to injuries which have been done to us.

A person who seeks to follow the teaching of Jesus might feel under an obligation to follow it regardless of consequences, but is it right for them to try to persuade others to work by its ethics? How can we commend the teachings of Jesus to the United Nations, which represents people of all religions and none?

I can see only one reason for trying to persuade non-Christians why international policies should be founded on forgiveness. Forgiveness will often fail, but paradoxically, of all of the ways of responding to aggression, it is the only way which can achieve real success.

I would like to briefly consider two lessons from history.

The First World War ended when the Central Powers conceded defeat on 11th November 1918, but the Versailles Peace Treaty wasn't signed until June 1919. During those six months Germany was kept under a blockade to starve the Germans into acceptance of the conditions set by the Allies. All relief work was forbidden, even food and medical supplies for babies and small children, and even after the Treaty had been signed tremendous bureaucratic obstacles were put in the way of relief workers. Herbert Hoover, later President of the USA, had been able to provide food relief to Belgium at the beginning of the war, and again afterwards. He was able to extend that relief to other countries, so that in the next few years more than a million German children had been fed.

The Allies held Germany solely responsible for the war, in the “war guilt” clauses which are still controversial. Germany was demilitarised, some of its territory given to neighbouring countries, and it was to pay huge reparations. Lloyd George predicted, with almost complete accuracy, that the result would be another war within 20 years. When the economy collapsed, and Germany could no longer keep up its reparation payments, France invaded and took away more territory. Germany was “isolated from the outside world, morally stigmatised and politically humiliated.”

The causes of war are rarely simple, but there is no doubt that the terms of the Peace Treaty provided the fertile soil in which the Nazis Party could grow. Perhaps war was

inevitable as a consequence of the Versailles Treaty, and there was no hope for the League of Nations.

The Second War ended in a similar way, with Germany, like its neighbours, starving and devastated. Few people thought that Germany should be given any aid while other countries were in desperate need, and relief workers were refused entry to Germany. Millions of Germans died from starvation and other hardships.

The Americans had plans for the defeated Germany. The Morgenthau plan was to dismantle German mines and factories, and to allow only agriculture. Huge reparations were to be extracted by forced labour. At that point it appeared that the whole cycle was about to begin again.

Then Herbert Hoover persuaded President Truman to initiate the Marshall Plan which gave nearly 18 billion dollars to Europe. The Americans did not keep control of the money, but expected the European countries to take responsibility for it, and, very significantly, Germany was to be included as a partner. The Soviets were invited to participate, but they declined.

Without that rehabilitation of Germany, the united Europe that we know today could never have arisen; the EEC was created, and now most countries in Western Europe are members of the European Union.

We now live in a Europe that few of our ancestors could have imagined. For more than a thousand years there were frequent wars between almost every combination of countries: Spain, France, the Low Countries, the Scandinavian countries, Germany, Austria, and Hungary – but now, in spite of local disputes, such as in Northern Ireland and the Basque areas, Western Europe has been enjoying peace for nearly 60 years. I believe that the Marshall Plan was an extraordinary act of generosity which did something which could never have been achieved by revenge or repression.

My other example comes from South Africa. From 1910 onwards, South Africa was ruled by the white minority, and from 1948 the policy of apartheid imposed more and more restrictions on the black community. Violent protests arose against this policy, and they were brutally suppressed. It was almost impossible to see any escape from this situation that would not have led to bloodshed. In 1990 the apartheid system collapsed, and in 1994 fully democratic elections gave majority representation to the African National Congress.

There would have been nothing easier than for the new black majority in power to have retaliated to decades of oppression by oppressing the white minority. Revenge, terrorism and civil war seemed likely – they have been common enough in other African countries.

Fortunately Nelson Mandela ensured that the new Constitution stated that “*there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need to ‘treat all fellow humans as humans’ and not to victimise them*”.

The wrongs of the past were neither to be revenged nor forgotten. The Commission for Truth and Reconciliation was set up, which granted amnesty to those who confessed their roles in full and could prove that their actions served some political motive.

The Commission’s work proved to be much more difficult than had been expected. Of course some people protested that justice had not been done, and the whites had not got what they deserved, but nevertheless the outcome was almost completely successful.

Bishop Desmond Tutu said afterwards:

“When we look around us at some of the conflict areas of the world, it becomes increasingly clear that there is not much of a future for them without forgiveness, without reconciliation. God has blessed us richly so that we might be a blessing to others. Quite improbably, we as South Africans have become a beacon of hope to others locked in deadly conflict to show them that peace, that a just resolution, is possible. If it could happen in South Africa, then it can certainly happen anywhere else. Such is the exquisite divine sense of humour.”

I don't think that it was merely chance that the initiative for the Marshall Plan came from Herbert Hoover, who was a Christian, nor that the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation were very much the work of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, who also were Christians.

These people, acting in the name of their nations and not of any religion, acted perfectly in the spirit of the teaching of Jesus, and showed that forgiveness can achieve the kind of peace and reconciliation that will always be beyond the power of revenge.

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