

The way of Christ—the way of non-violence.

I grew up in a church where the way of non-violence had been tried and proved costly but which I took to be the Christian norm— that Jesus meant what he said, ‘Love your enemies’. The conscientious objectors I met and those I only heard about as they were killed as they served as stretcher-bearers had to face the accusation of cowardice.

Later I was challenged by those who said non-violence was unrealistic or even immoral in the face of the horrors of evil in the world— the ‘what if?’ arguments.

With pacifist teachers at school I looked at the problem of the way violence breeds violence and causes us to reflect the same behaviour as the enemy. As we respond violently we become what we oppose and hate. I learnt that pacifism is not ‘passivism’ but an active and realistic following of the way of Jesus.

I have become increasingly aware of how non-violence is something we have to practise in every aspect of life if we are ever to be effective in violent situations.

Walter Wink’s three books, ‘Naming the Powers’, ‘Unmasking the Powers’ and ‘Engaging the Powers’ have inspired me .

Jesus’ teaching about turning the other cheek, going the second mile, giving your under garment as well as your coat—were about taking control and refusing to be manipulated into a violent confrontation or passive capitulation

The way of non-violence was not fight or flight but Jesus’ third way. Wink suggests these include:-

- Seize moral initiative
- Find a creative alternative to violence
- Assert your own humanity and dignity as a person
- Meet force with ridicule or humour
- Break the cycle of humiliation
- Refuse to submit to or accept the inferior position
- Expose the injustice of the system
- Recognize your own power
- Be willing to suffer rather than retaliate
- Force the oppressor to see you in a new light
- Deprive the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective
- Be willing to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws

Pacifism is costly and not for cowards. Ghandi reckoned you could not move directly from flight to third way but need to pass through fight stage—not

actually being violent but angry enough to be willing to fight and die for a just cause.

Jesus' teaching on non-violence is not legalistic—telling an abused woman she must put up with her husband's violence or telling a child being bullied merely to turn the other cheek—a non-violent solution is best but that needs training and courage and people should not be made to feel guilty because their instinct is to hit back. Rather the spirit of non-violent response to evil is a gift—we need releasing from the power of violence and destruction to creative non-violence.

Too easily we can become what we hate when we are fiercely opposing an injustice.

Most people say they hate war but consider it to be the only way in some situations. They point to teaching on 'the just war'. These words from Niall O'Brien explore 'The Myth of Just War'

'No wonder so many people, gentle and kind people, quiet and unaggressive people, find themselves saying at long last, "There is only one way to deal with ...evil tyrants.. There's only one language these people understand—the gun.

To such people I say, welcome to the largest consensus the world has ever known: a consensus between east and west, between capitalist and communist, between mosque, church and synagogue. All agree there comes a time when it is just to kill each other. Welcome home to the consensus on which our world is built.

Ultimately we are faced with two choices; to accept the 'myth' of the just war, that as a last resort killing is moral, or to accept the 'myth' of non-violence: we have no last resort—killing is never right. In the first case, sooner or later we will come to the moment when the conditions for using violence are verified, when we reach the last 'resort'. In the second case, believing in our myth that violence is never justified, having no 'last resort', human beings come up with alternatives from the depth of their creativeness. We can and we will learn to live together but only when we have closed off that escape route known as the last resort.

(Niall O'Brien, "Making the Myth Real")

The new reality Jesus proclaimed was non-violent. Early Christians recognised this and refused to serve in the Roman army—eschewing violence and idolatry. They opposed war—then came Constantine- 'Christianity's

weaponless victory over the Roman Empire eventuated in the weaponless victory of the empire over the gospel. No defeat is so well- disguised as victory! In the year 303 Diocletian forbade any member of the Roman Army to be a Christian. By the year 416 no one could be a member of the Roman Army unless he was a Christian.. The oppressed became oppressors. Augustine (d.430) drew on Stoic just war principles to articulate a position that was to dominate church thinking from his time until now.

You cannot make peace– real peace with war. Christians have a vocation for non-violence, grounded in the teaching of Jesus, the nature of God, the ethos of the kingdom and the power of the resurrection.