

Reflections in times of war

The way of the Christian is very particular, and our responsibilities as we live in this world are very particular. We are not citizens of this world, but of the Kingdom of Heaven. We are sent by our Saviour Jesus Christ into this world to be salt and yeast. We are His witnesses. We are bearers here of Him and His light and love. The Orthodox Way is all about balance-not extremes, but balance.

“The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the ungodly will be short.” Prov 10:27.

“The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.” Prov. 21:31.

These two proverbs of Solomon summarize both what is necessary for us Christians, and also where so many of us go astray. For us, communion with the Lord, being loved by Him and loving Him (I John 4: 19), is the foundation of our life in Christ. Indeed, this has been the real foundation of our path in life since our creation. God said: “Let us make Man in our image, after our likeness” (1st Book of Moses 1:26); and at the giving of the Law (Ten Commandments), He said to us through Moses: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart” (5th Book of Moses 6:4-6). And since, as the Apostle John reminds us, “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (I John 4: 16), and “We love, because He first loved us” (I John 4:19), this loving relationship with God must be the real *raison d’être* of our lives. And, as the Apostle John further says, if we love God we will, in being salt and yeast, definitely do works of love towards our fellow human beings, and indeed, towards all creation.

If we live in this love, and therefore can willingly and instinctively (like Adam and Eve before the fall-it is possible in Christ) follow His commandments, He gives us salvation and life. This is the essence of His covenant with us, from Noah and Abraham until now. He loves us far beyond our capacity to comprehend such love, yet He invites us to participate in this love, to grow up in it, and therefore, in Christ, as members of His Body, to grow up in Him, Himself (theosis).

But, as is so often the case, even from the time of Adam and Eve, we have this tendency to look at ourselves, to focus on ourselves instead of on God, even to substitute ourselves for God, and by doing this to abandon our part in the covenant established, and to turn our backs on His salvation. In reading the Psalms, and in reading again during this year’s Lent the Prophet Isaiah, I have had this brought home to me time and again. How many times, when kings and princes took matters into their own hands were there disasters. But how many times, when these rulers trusted in God, the Lord delivered His faithful people from the hands of their enemies, even by the work of Angels. And how many times in the Christian era has the Lord delivered His faithful people (as we are so often begging) from earthquake, flood, fire, invasion by enemies, and civil war. All of this, for Orthodox Christians, is reinforced by our reading of the lives of the saints. For me, too, this reality

has been reinforced by both reading about, and listening to the reading on tape, of “Father Arseny.” In cases when prisoners were ready to kill him, or sometimes each other, God gave him both the right words and a strong supporter. When he and Alexie were placed in an outdoor punishment cell at -30C, God protected and warmed them. And this was supplemented for me by the teachings of St Silouan through Archimandrites Sophrony and Zacharias. They say, and I see, that we must try to depend on God for everything.

Our canonical history has parallel lessons for us. From the earliest times until now, the Orthodox Church has-I suppose in part starting from Abel and the suffering of Christ-taken the shedding of blood very seriously. Even if a cleric should accidentally kill someone while driving, he is automatically stopped from serving, sometimes permanently. If anyone at all even accidentally kills anyone, it means the person is to abstain from receiving Holy Communion for a substantial length of time, as a sign of sorrow for the loss of human life. In the past, if soldiers killed anyone, even if under orders, it would be the same. Recently, an old Cossack in France would not receive Communion until his death-bed, because he had shed blood in World War I.

It has always been understood that we do not live, and never have lived, in a Christian theocracy, in which the ideal and the covenant might actually be lived out. Even the so-called Christian empires of the past were really mostly so only in name. And in all governments, there are always armies, and with all governments, there is always the risk of war, and there is always the risk for warriors of killing or being killed. We must, as Christians, find the middle way in Christ.

From the earliest times, we have known that we are obliged to pray for our civil governing authorities, even and especially if they are killing us. So early Christians prayed for persecuting emperors, and martyrs forgave and blessed those who were killing them. This is strikingly the case in the martyric death, only two hundred years ago, in Alaska, of St Juvenal the Priest-monk companion of St Herman. It was accepted from earliest times that Christians would have to participate in armies of these governments. But when they did so, they participated still knowing what the foundations of Christian consciousness are. If they shed blood, they showed appropriate repentance. We have soldier martyrs who give us examples of this. Some soldiers, and even kings, became monks afterwards, one Tsar perhaps in the 19th Century. One may do one’s duty, but also bear the consequence of this duty.

Some people like to glorify certain wars, and to say that they are just. But there is no such thing as a just war. All wars kill many soldiers, and all wars kill large, sometimes unimaginably large, numbers of innocent persons of all ages. All wars feed and fuel a blood-thirsty demon, and all wars make warriors vulnerable to the blindness of, the slavery to the demon of bloodlust. All wars, no matter how “just” they are made out to be, have long-lasting consequences, often with deep hatreds, and often with subsequent wars. This is one of the most dangerous of all factors, and there is certainly no balance, no middle way in it. Without a strong faith in Christ, a person would be lost. I have met many a person, among them my own relatives, who suffered for many decades after their participation in wars. They were tortured in their hearts, and in their dreams. Some

persons never were able to live a balanced life again because of the spiritual trauma. Wars are simply destructive.

Even though this is a sad fact, the Church does not condemn anyone's serving in the armed forces. Many real Christian believers have served and do serve in armed forces, and do so honorably. But they do so not just because they are so strong themselves; they do so because they have many people praying for them. Many a person has truly been saved from death, many a person has been saved from killing unnecessarily, many a person has been saved from all sorts of catastrophes, because others were praying for God's protection for him or her. And this is indeed our responsibility.

It is correct for us to do our part, to remind our leaders to do everything they can to avoid an armed conflict. It is right that we always pray for the peace of the world, and for reconciliation. This is exactly what we sing about in the Beatitudes, and it is what we ask in the Our Father. It is right that we, as Christians, pray for our governing authorities, and ask for God's wisdom for them. It is also our responsibility to live in forgiveness with all, as Christ, and through His love to bring true peace to the world. Always in the world there is the temptation to resort to violence of various sorts. It is our challenge as Christians, by our love, by our service in the footsteps of Christ, to show to the world the better Way, to show how the Weapon of Peace brings life, and how Christ is the real Victor for us all.

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