

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: MARK HACKNEY

Isaiah 2.4; 9.5. Wednesday 9th December 2020.

I could say that Christianity has a long tradition of employing soldiering imagery, but, I think, it can be put more accurately: 'Christianity has a proud tradition of *subverting* soldiering imagery'.

I remember an atheist writing, "Christians ... they believe that they are at war." Well, Heaven *is* worth fighting for. It's just that, with our heavenly citizenship, the country we Christians are fighting for ('on earth as it is in heaven') does war differently. Very differently.

One example of this difference might be the famous hymn, 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. It is often now retitled 'Onward Christian Pilgrims', yet its warring imagery remains. Drawing on scriptures, it outlines how and why a Christian '*fight*s.' We do it differently from the worldly world:

'Onward Christian pilgrims, Hearts and voices raise, Swords are turned to ploughshares, Pride and envy cease, Truth embraces justice, Hope resolves in peace.'

Soldiers, tragically, usually have to inflict pain, but this hymn insists that we Christians '*share* the pain and anger'. It's a bit of a strange army we signed up for when we became heavenly citizens. 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus, you soldiers of the cross'.

This is what Christian soldiering looks like: replacing warfare with love and peace on earth. Our two verses from Isaiah foreshadow this beautifully.

Isaiah 2.4 shows us what Christians truly battle for: to stop investigating war as a solution to a problem.

'nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.'

Isaiah's immediate focus is Judah and Jerusalem, where he wants power, authority, to be exercised in a faithful, Godly way. Isaiah wishes disputes to be resolved through an appeal to God – not by groups indulging in their own priorities. He wishes to stop different interest groups warring with one another so that they gain a substantial peace dividend.

Yet, his consideration is much wider than this because he inclusively suggests *all* peoples and nations can experience God's rule and harmony. The *world* will come to share God's peace. It is a universal peace that God offers.

Isaiah argues that the world may only experience peace when it submits to the Word that will go forth from Zion. This is where the one true God has revealed himself. It is foolhardy to imagine that true peace can be achieved in any other way.

This is what we are fighting for in *our* strange Christian manner. Our weapons are empathy, love, patience, forbearance, compassion. This is how the Kingdom of God conducts its warfare.

Isaiah held in his mind the pain of the world's injustices and faithlessness, but God inspired him to imagine a better, peaceful future – one that can only be brought into reality through a true faith, a faith that engages with the world, promoting and adhering to God's message. With chapter 9, verse 5 we may imagine the cessation of war:

For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

And we should not turn God's words of peace into a mere exhortation to accept a responsibility for us fighting to bring about peace. We should have at the forefront of our mind: *it is a promise*.

Looking at our image of a toy soldier, I am reminded too of the Book of Ephesians where Paul famously describes for us, what my NRSV Bible calls, 'The Whole Armour of God'. Here, Paul describes a Roman soldier's protective uniform and gives each piece of the uniform a Christian twist.

Paul, like Isaiah, knew his immediate audience well. People were surrounded by Roman soldiers. They were everywhere, they would have been a very common sight. They were there to keep order ... enforce how Imperial Rome thought you should live and think. But those troublesome Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, had switched their country, and now, mentally, lived 'On earth as it is in Heaven. They followed God, not Caesar.

Taking parts of the Roman armour, Paul subverts their usefulness: it is a belt of truthfulness you put round your waist; the shiny breastplate reveals your righteousness, and your army boots will help you spread Jesus' message. Your shield of faith will protect you from non-heavenly attack. Salvation is your helmet, and you always hold ready, your sword of the spirit: the word of God.

Isaiah has foreshadowed this in our two verses: we shall not lift up a worldly sword against nations, but use our sword of The Spirit. The Spirit who truly desires peace on earth.

In the light of this, it does not seem at all perverse to me (especially at this time of year) to be looking **at a cheerily faced toy soldier**. His **smile** is a hope in the peace of God's future; his **cuteness** a reminder of the sublime naivety with which the Christian soldier fights worldly values, replacing hatred with love; his **blood-red uniform** an emblem of Jesus' saving grace.

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