

Sermon War and Catholicity 09.11.14
Remembrance Sunday Revelation 7:9-17
United Reformed Church, Highgate Julian Templeton

A Protestant Pastor in a small Swiss village called Safenwil opened his newspaper one day in 1914 and discovered a manifesto of 93 academics, scientists, artists and theologians defending and supporting Germany's military action in invading Belgium. They ended by declaring:

Have faith in us! Believe, that we shall carry on this war to the end as a civilized nation, to whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven, and a Kant is just as sacred as its own hearths and homes. For this we pledge you our names and our honor

The Pastor in question who read this was Karl Barth, he later wrote about its shattering impact:

...ninety-three German intellectuals issued a terrible manifesto, identifying themselves before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg. For me it was almost worse than the violation of Belgian neutrality. And to my dismay, among the signatories I discovered the names of almost all my German teachers... It was like the twilight of the gods...

Barth experienced a crisis that made him question not only his theological education but also the whole direction of European Christianity. The Church in Germany had effectively baptised its culture to such an extent that when a prophetic voice of protest needed to be raised, none were willing or able to cry out. The realisation that even his theological teachers were willing to throw their weight behind international imperialism

and militarism drove Barth back to the Bible. He began to preach in a new way. He immersed himself in Bible study and discovered what he called a "strange new world". In particular, he engaged deeply with the Letter of Paul to the Romans, eventually publishing a Commentary. Barth's *Commentary on Romans*, especially its second edition "fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians." It is completely unlike any commentary I have ever read, and is really a theological tract warning against the human religiosity that can too easily be commandeered by cultural forces, and against it asserting the otherness of God, whose revelation in Jesus Christ causes a crisis in human assumptions. Barth protested not only against a god fashioned in the human image but also against Christian faith as a purely private and individual matter. Barth maintained that Christian faith, and therefore theology, are always social and public, and the task of the Church is to be the gospel's social expression and public advocate.

Barth represents an atypical Germanic reaction to the Great War. What about the reactions of British ministers and theologians to the war? The then Bishop of London became chaplain of the London Rifle Brigade and in a sermon declared:

. . . this is a *Holy War*. We are on the side of Christianity against anti-Christ. We are on the side of the New Testament which respects the weak, and honours treaties, and dies for its friends, and looks upon war as a regrettable necessity . . . It is a Holy War, and to fight in a Holy war is an honour . . .

And this support for the war from representative of the established Church was typical, not only of Anglicans, but also of the Free Churches, who, after some initial caution, became

fully supportive of the war. As A.E. Garvie, Congregationalist theologian and Principal of New College, London, wrote:

On August 2, I believed that Great Britain could and should keep out of the European conflict, but the violation of Belgian neutrality made me waver, and the speeches in the House of Commons of Mr Asquith and Sir Edward Grey convinced me that duty and honour called to participation.

There were, however, some dissenters, among whom was J.H. Rushbrooke, Minister of the Free Church, Hampstead Garden Suburb. He studied in Berlin and was married to a German. A leading figure in the British-German churches' peace movement and editor of *The Peacemaker* he had been attending the peace conference at Constance in early August 1914 and with his wife and daughter was still in Germany when war was declared. He had to remain there for several weeks before returning home. He wrote to his congregation:

Perhaps the shock of this war has fallen on few as heavily as upon me, who had toiled for years on behalf of friendly relations between two nearly-related peoples, and had believed that the Christian faith was strong enough to overcome the suspicions and jealousies that make for war.

In fact, with the notable exception of the Society of Friends, it was only when conscription was introduced that some of the Free Church leaders began to have doubts about their support of the war, and this, one is tempted to comment, was probably only because conscription offended their cherished 'freedom of conscience'.

If we try to think objectively and dispassionately about the nations of the world drawn into an inter-Christian European conflict, employing tanks, bombs, fighter planes, warships, submarines, rifles and machine guns to kill one another, we might conclude that this is collective madness. Others, however, will point out that if some are not willing to meet force with force then we risk a world dominated by bullies. The Presbyterian theologian and Principle of Westminster College, Cambridge, John Oman, wrote a book entitled *The War and its Issues* in 1915. In it, Oman makes the criticism that

'this death struggle of the nations' was marked by the conspicuous 'absence of true catholicism' that transcends national boundaries.

Oman's argument is that it is only by practising catholicity—by which he means Christian fellowship that transcends tribal and national identities—that we will find an all-encompassing communion. Such communion is not free from disagreement or even conflict—how could it be otherwise with people from different cultures who speak different languages—but those who are in communion refuse to allow their disagreements and conflicts to escalate into war. At a recent consultation I was involved with in Zurich between European Protestants and Anglicans there was at times strong disagreement, mainly about our different understandings of ministry. But because we recognised a higher unity in Christ that transcends our denominational variations, we resolved to keep working towards 'full visible unity'.

In our reading from the Revelation of John, the vast multitude of people assembled before the throne of God and the Lamb are "from all races and tribes, nations and languages," (Rev. 7:9). It is highly significant that John, probably a pastor of small

and threatened church comprised mainly of Jews in Asia Minor, receives a vision in which those who have come through a great ordeal are not from one ethnic or religious group, but are a catholic or international multitude who together shout aloud:

Victory to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!
Rev. 7:10

They celebrate that the war is over. And who has won the war? Not them, but the most unexpected victor: the Lamb. The Lamb, who is Jesus Christ, has won the victory of the cross, using only weapons of redemptive love. The reference to robes being made white by washing them in the blood of the Lamb is only understandable in the light of Christ's voluntary sacrifice of himself to die on the cross. And Christ's death on the cross, in turn, is only understandable in the light of the Old Testament understanding of sacrificial blood as that which atones for sin and reconciles those who were estranged. But whereas the cultic sacrifices of Israel were for Jews only, the voluntary self-sacrifice of Jesus was for *all peoples*. And what Jesus sacrifices is his life-blood. That is, he not only lays down his own life for others, but also his sacrifice gives a new quality of life to others. We hear the effect of those animated by this new quality of life in the language of praise:

Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour, power and might, be to our God for ever!
Amen!
Rev. 7:12

Note that angels, elders, and living creatures are not extolling their own glory and wisdom and honour and power and might but that of *God*. Rowan Williams invites us to imagine what

human speech would be like without evasion or self-serving, if our speaking were 'entirely transparent to eternal reality' and 'overwhelmed by God's grace' by being 'nothing but confession and adoration' (*The Edge of Words*, 47). Only those who work for catholicity, who risk full communion with their fellows under God, can dare to use such open and generous language. Mostly our language is riven with the effect of partisan loyalty to nationality, ethnicity, tribe, and party; it discriminates, it divides, it is suspicious of the other. And it is not difficult to understand how such language foments grievance and leads sometimes to war. By contrast, the victory of the Lamb in which we are invited to share is the victory of the cross over grievance and hostility and blood feud. It dares to place a full stop after competing stories of historical injustice, saying: 'thus far and no further, enough, it is finished.'

The Protestant Pastor, Karl Barth, who was so shocked at seeing his theological teachers endorse imperialist war in 1914, would in 1933 in Barmen, Germany, draft a Declaration of Faith opposing the Nazification of the German churches. This was became the founding document of the Confessing Church. After the war had ended, only the Confessing Church in Germany had credibility. And it was out of this and similar movements of reconciliation that the United Nations (1946) and the World Council of Churches came into being (1948), and the Marshall Plan succeeded where the Treaty of Versailles had patently failed. While these pan-national and pan-denominational movements have not always succeeded in preventing war, they provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation. In this sense, the spirit of catholicity guides them. One derivation of the term 'Catholic' is the Greek *kath holou*, which means 'part of the whole'. Realising that we are only one part of a much greater whole tempers the tendency to act independently and aggressively. Thanks be to God.