



The Nonviolence of the Gospel

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It's difficult to talk about peace when daily on our televisions we see images of violence. Ones that come to my mind are the daily images of the damage to Aleppo, the aftermath of the Iraq war or the sight of violent men driving trucks into crowds. It's easy just to feel fear and despair – what can we do? It seems too big and overwhelming

Pope Francis has described it as World War fought piecemeal: in the 20th Century we had the First and Second World War and now we've got a Third World War in instalments. However it also comes to mind that there must be a different way to deal with conflict - we need to give 'peace a chance', as the song says. In a deep place we know that our faith is challenging us to make a different response (as many people have done already).

This Peace Sunday Pope Francis has challenged us to embrace a nonviolent approach to politics. How do we deal with this challenge? Well, first, we need to look at the Gospels and how Jesus responded. Jesus did not fight back but he didn't run away. He refused to hate. He prevented people from being violent, for example, preventing the stoning of the woman found guilty of adultery.

We are all familiar with the reading in Matthew's gospel where Jesus turns on its head the Old Testament teaching 'an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth.' Instead Jesus says: '*Do not resist one who is evil, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also*'. This has always felt very passive and long suffering to me.

However, reading the work of Biblical scholar **Walter Wink** proves to be quite a revelation. He has researched the original Greek of the Gospel and his conclusion is that it should be translated as: '*Do not resist one who is evil with **violence**,*' - it doesn't say 'do not resist evil'.

Turn the other cheek also has a much more complicated explanation. We need to understand the context that Jesus was teaching to very ordinary people such as shepherds and fishermen - not rich people, in the main. They might well have experienced someone hitting them on the cheek with the back of their hand, a cuff, from someone who was in authority, a Roman soldier or their boss. In such circumstances they could not afford to retaliate –but they could 'turn the other cheek'. This would mean the violent person would be in a dilemma as the left cheek now offers the perfect target for a blow from the right fist. However, from the historical record we know that only equals fought with fists. This means that he would have had to use his left hand to hit the other person. But in 1st Century



Palestine this would have been an unclean thing to do. So by turning the other cheek, you were taking a stand against violence rather than submitting to it. It is an active resistance and not a passive resistance.

Pope Francis in his Peace Sunday message quotes Pope Benedict

“For Christians, nonviolence is not merely tactical behaviour but a person’s way of being, the attitude of one who is so convinced of God’s love and power that he or she is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Love of one’s enemy constitutes the nucleus of the ‘Christian Revolution’”. The Gospel command to love your enemies (cf. Lk 6:27) is rightly considered the magna carta of Christian nonviolence. It does not consist in succumbing to evil..., but in responding to evil with good (cf. Rom 12:17-21), and thereby breaking the chain of injustice”.

There is no doubt this is a challenging message.

For centuries the concept of the Just War, first in a religious context and then accepted as an ethical stance in the secular world, was the way we judged war. We thought we could make war fair and minimise violence, but now in the world of nuclear weapons and violence in different parts of the world (a third world war in instalments), it ceases to make sense and creates a culture of acceptance of war. Another challenge is that nonviolence sounds negative and passive: we need to move to action. Working in a nonviolent way has to be orientated towards working for justice and change. Peace is not just the absence of violence. So, the common response to such ideas is “it will never work”, “human nature is against it” and “people are naturally violent”. Such responses, however, deny the power of God in our lives and as people of faith we can never give up.

There are many examples from past and present – people who were courageous and transformative:

- St Martin de Tours is the first known conscientious objector in the 4th Century
- A modern day conscientious objector is Franz Jagerstatter who refused to be conscripted into the German Army in the Second World War
- Blessed Oscar Romero was martyred because he challenged the men of violence in El Salvador.

A great example of modern times is the revolution by candlelight at the Nickolai Kirche in Leipzig.



In East Germany the Protestant Church provided a unique haven for independent citizens' groups to meet beyond the control of the State. At St Nicholas Church in Leipzig Pastor Christian Führer started regular 'Peace Prayers' in 1982 and the small group persevered despite harassment by the secret police. In 1989 widespread election fraud provoked furious demonstrations across the country. The East German Church Federation called for a democratic multi-party system, economic reforms, a free press and freedom to travel. Thousands now attended Monday peace prayers in Leipzig, where they were urged to use nonviolence. Tension was at its height on 9 October 1989, with thousands of extra Stasi police on the streets, and a bloody confrontation expected. Three citizens' leaders met Communist officials in private and agreed that if the protestors remained peaceful so would the police. After the prayer service 70,000 unarmed people holding lighted candles marched through Leipzig. It was a turning point. Each week numbers increased as prayer services followed by protest demonstrations erupted all over the country. On 4 November half a million marched in Berlin; on 8 November the entire Communist leadership resigned, and the following night the border between East and West was opened and the Berlin Wall came down."

**Source: Ronald J. Sider, Nonviolent Action,
Brazos Press, 2015, pp 95-100**

None of this is easy to put into practice. In the UK training of citizens in the techniques of nonviolent resistance is not on the agenda for Government. However, the messages of the Gospels are ones of nonviolent resistance to the injustices of this world. There are outstanding examples of people who have put these principles into action – they are just not widely known. It's time that, as Christians, we started to build an alternative narrative of how to deal with conflicts. It is going to be a long haul.

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