

This is a War!

I had an email, which had bounced around several members of the ministry team. When I opened it this morning, I was a little surprised to read a statement in Bold capital letters – entitled – “THIS IS A WAR”! So I opened it up, curious to see who and how I had upset someone so much. When I got the full message – it read – “This is a warning” – which wasn’t too much of a relief. Well, actually – it came from Gmail – warning that one or more recipients had not received a particular message! I had no idea that the result would be a warning – or even a war.

That seems to be the note struck by psalm 2 – as a result of not getting a message – there is both warning and war! Why do the nations rage – and the peoples plot in vain. The Kings of the earth take their stand – and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Messiah!

Psalm 2 is a coronation psalm. It celebrates the enthronement of the new messiah – the anointed one – the King. It speaks of how God will bless the King, against the enemies of God! It talks about how God will bless the king and smash his enemies to pieces. The kings of the earth are invited to kiss the Son – that is, to kiss the King of the Jews! Because his wrath can flare up in a moment!

It’s a pretty warlike psalm. One of those bits of the Old Testament that those of us with strong pacifist sympathies would like to hurry through quickly and get to something that a church choir could sing with less embarrassment. But in some ways, once you’ve walked through this psalm it sticks to your shoe – and then it follows you through the New Testament. It is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament! It’s used, for instance, to talk about how Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilatus become friends over the death of Jesus, when they had – till that moment – always been enemies. (The Kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers gather together – against the Lord, and against his anointed one – his Messiah!)

So – again – what do we do with a psalm like this? Because clearly, when we get to the New Testament, and the Gospel reading – Jesus is not marching around declaring wars on the enemies of the Jewish nation state! This is not a Messiah who seizes power and once he has power, sets about achieving God’s will. Because the moment you make seizing power your first goal, it becomes not only difficult, but impossible to achieve God’s will. Because this is a God whose strength is made perfect in weakness, this is a Messiah whose throne is not a seat of power – but an execution stake that symbolises ultimate powerlessness! This is a Gospel that is not the political liberation brought about by the exertion of force! This is a Gospel whose full blown liberation comes in a different way.

This is not to say that Jesus is not fighting a battle. It is not to say that he is not waging a war. It is not to say that he does not have enemies. This is a Jesus who does seize control of land! Just as the psalm says – ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. But when we listen to what this Messiah has to say – he claims that it is the meek, quite literally, those with no property of their own, it is the meek who will inherit the land! Not the earth as in planet earth – but the land!

The life of Brian had this right – when someone at the back of the crowd who were listening to the sermon on the mount said – Oh that’s nice – it’s about the meek got something!

A different kind of battle

So yes, we all are happy to say nowadays – oh yes – Jesus is fighting a battle, but it’s a spiritual battle against the devil or something. He is not fighting to build a nation – he is waging a war for people’s souls. And yet, time after time in our Christian paperbacks – ever since the time of the church growth movement and probably before – a different kind of battle language is taken up. This is, the contemporary equivalent to wars being waged for land – into the contemporary market strategies (and let’s be clear – any talk of strategy and we are into the language of war – because strategy is from a Greek word to describe the deployment of the stratiotes – the soldiers). And marketing strategies and management strategies tend today to find their way into Christian paperbacks – where those strategies will be adorned with bible verses to prove that marketing and management efficiency are timelessly, unquestionably, invaluable.

Make your church grow. Make your church more effective. Focus on what you want to achieve. One of the most famous advocates of this approach is someone through whom I became a Christian in the first place. A Christian entrepreneurial Baptist minister! And he argues that churches need to become outcome-oriented! That you run your church on the basis of what it is that you would like your church to be achieving! Sound marketing strategy – atrocious theology!

Focussing on the fruit of obedience – and setting out to achieve it, instead of actually focussing on obedience, and allowing the fruit to manifest itself naturally! What might, on the surface, appear to be holy, commendable, biblical means of exerting power to make the world a better place because there are more converts, bigger churches and more Christians in positions of power – actually leads to a denial of the Gospel once delivered to the saints. The same old war of Psalm 2 – updated into its most contemporary political expression in the quiet endorsement of marketing and management techniques that serve ultimately to keep the empire functioning the way it always has.

And when you look at how the empire itself functions today – we see once again how the face of war has changed! At the end of 2003, the Ministry of Defence observed that “there are currently no major conventional military threats to the UK or NATO ... it is now clear that we no longer need to retain a capability against the re-emergence of a direct conventional strategic threat”. And yet most of this ministry’s budget spent on retaining a capability against the emergence of a direct conventional strategic threat?

What is the big threat that faces us today? I don’t think there is a massive terrorist threat that warrants investing billions of pounds on new fighter jets – nor does it seem necessary to have an enormous nuclear arsenal! The major threat, one that threatens human existence as a whole, is massive, inevitable, and almost unstoppable! Global warming – of course! And yet, the way our government budgets for this – with a drop in the ocean compared to the billions it pours into the Ministry of Defence! Even when there’s nothing left to defend!

The face of war has changed enormously. The threats we face as a human race have changed enormously. But the structures of power have not changed, and those who have fought to occupy positions of power within those structures, make a practical, swift and sensible response to the new threats we face – impossible! The human lust for power – the human inability to relinquish power – means that we do not have the ability to use our God-given resources to address climate change effectively!

What kind of war?

In what ways was Jesus fighting a battle? Apart from the fact that the enemies were closer to home than he had imagined! John's Gospel even has Jesus resisting the temptation to call down armour-clad angels to force a military victory.

I hate the idea that Jesus was engaged in war. That he was fighting a battle. I don't like thinking in those terms at all. But what do we do with this psalm? Do we just say – oh, well, they were ignorant and they did not understand God as well as we do now that we live in a world that hides war and suffering and death so that it doesn't interfere with our enjoyment of individualist, consumerist, materialist comfort? Particularly in the last couple of decades, there has been a marked difference in the way that even stories of war are told. The successful war film now has to have characters that 'feel' the pain of war in a way that John Wayne remained impervious to. You see this even with the James Bond films now – which in some ways bring violence to the fore in a way that it never was – and in other ways – make James bond feel the pain of his own actions – instead of raising a cheeky eyebrow and leaving a witty Roger Moorism for his newly created corpses.

But in kids films it's the same. The enemy is no longer the storm trooper with a human voice. Because each storm trooper has his own story waiting to be told. No. Now – in the starwards world of space travel at light speed, laser gun shoot outs and destructive capacities to destroy a planet in a moment – the baddy robots have monotone voices from a 1980s children's toy technology. The enemies who get shot to bits must, under no circumstances, be human or even living enemies – otherwise you cannot justify their massacre!

So who is the enemy against whom Jesus is battling! Who is our enemy? Are we simply left to say that the enemy is the evil in our hearts – so that we are left battling a psychological war against our own inner demons?

Still not very satisfying is it! I think Saint Paul helped us here – with the language of principalities and powers, spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms – forces at work in our world – too great for us to name, too large for us to defeat. Forces that imperceptibly shape the lives of millions. There is a battle and there is war. And yes – it is real people and not robots that are involved.

But the people themselves are not the enemy. In Jesus' own day, the Romans themselves were not the enemy. There was a greater enemy pulling the strings – a greater force at work that crushes the oppressor as well as the oppressed. And though the oppressor may well be the one who vocalises and administers force – be it against Jesus himself, or against the church – it was not the Romans who were defeated on the cross! It was something else.

The salvation achieved on the cross – amongst other things – includes the idea of actual deliverance from a military enemy. That is what the word means for those who translated the OT into Greek. Rather like the cavalry arriving to save the day in a cowboy story! How is that achieved on the cross?

The victory, and the actual military salvation are achieved because this is a new tactic. A new way of fighting a battle. The way of powerlessness. It is at the cross, at the very moment that it appears Jesus is defeated – that he has actually disarmed the powers that be – robbing them

of all power. Because this sacrifice, this readiness for failure, this refusal to play the world's power games, this refusal to bring salvation by violent force, this is where real victory lies. This is where the cycle of violence is broken. Because somehow, impracticably, beyond belief, beyond expectation – God achieves his purposes through the self sacrifice of his anointed one!

Somehow, the power and authority granted to the devil in Luke's Gospel, is defeated – when little people, relinquish what little power they have, when they follow Jesus to the point of self-sacrifice.

We have seen at the political level in our engagement with homeless people: I keep getting contacted by journalists at the moment – asking me to criticise the police, or local government or charities – because they are behaving badly. And they assume that I will, because much of the work we have done over the last year has brought us into conflict with some of these people. But we're not interested in making enemies of people in pursuit of justice. We are aiming at changing a bigger injustice that dehumanises those who administer government homeless policy as much as those who are woken in the night to be hosed down. Our real enemies are the principalities and powers that quietly shape us to believe it is humane and good to clear homeless people from our streets.

I have seen a little example of this in church. With one of our members. I walked along the street with him last year – and as we walked we were dodging dangerously wielded umbrellas. And one of them caught my friend in the forehead, causing some distress. Had it been me – I would probably have said something rather aggressive. Or at least defensive. But no – the response I witnessed – from someone present here this evening – was this! An enormous smile, accompanied by the words, "Thank you for your umbrella!" How on earth do you respond to someone who says that? That – for me – was a little picture of the wrath of God – gentle, powerful, impossible to withstand! That – is a little example of the wrath of God – Read psalm 2 again with that picture in mind – and you hear – the grace of God – the love of God, and the wrath of God all rolled into one!

