

CIS NEWSLETTER

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The Fruits of the Earth

War hangs over the world like a dark cloud. We easily get used to living in the dark. We easily get used to hearing about people dying in Iraq. Among the many texts of the second Vatican Council, there is a little paragraph with profound significance: 'Insofar as men are sinners, the threat of war hangs over them and will so continue until Christ comes again; but insofar as they can vanquish sin by coming together in charity, violence itself will be vanquished and these words will be fulfilled: "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."'

These are powerful words. Notice how the statement starts with the idea that it is because of sin that war hangs over us. A declaration of war is always a defeat for the civilised world. In the past, many used to think that it was legitimate for a nation to engage in war, especially in self-defence. Today, however, with the escalation of scientific weapons of mass destruction, the Church is more and more aware of the importance of resorting to other means of putting an end to conflicts and disagreement. We are all obliged to do everything possible, including prayer and sacrifice, to free ourselves from the bondage of war.

We recall the millions of people who, through the course of history, have found themselves dragged into horrendous situations where they had to kill their neighbour or get killed themselves. Their deepest longing was for a world of peace and harmony. We, who have come on the world scene after their terrible ordeals, are obliged to work for the realisation of their deepest dream. And the dream is this: to beat our swords into ploughshares. What does this mean for us concretely? It means making every effort to procure peace. It means also making our voices heard, so that more and more of the enormous sums of money spent in the production of arms may be channelled towards the building of a better world, towards the development of peoples. Is this an empty wish? True: ideals are ideals. They are meant to be unreachable. But they are indispensable all the same – indispensable as beacons of light. They show us the way.

Money is power. Some people have a lot of it; some have less. Consider the parable of the talents in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25. A wealthy man gives three of his servants some talents. When he returns, he wants to settle his accounts with them. The word talent refers to a sum of money. Traditionally, however, we have come to consider the talents as corresponding to all the gifts we receive from God. After all, no one decides how to be born and when to be born. We are all thrown, as it were, into existence, and we all find ourselves blessed with certain endowments and possibilities: with a heart to love, with a mind to understand, with a will to act, with material possessions to use, and with a planet to heal. In the parable from Matthew's Gospel, the servant who attracts our attention most is the third one. He holds a very negative image of his Master. He replies: 'I have heard you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered'. In line with that attitude, he receives the treatment he was expecting, and perhaps even worse. Are we somehow like this third servant? This is an important question. We have received a number of talents. How are we to use them? The gospel message is quite clear. We cannot simply dig a hole in the ground and hide them. If we do that, we should expect the same kind of treatment as the third servant.

And this is not the worst scenario. We may perhaps enlarge on the parable by imagining a fourth servant. The fourth servant receives one talent as well, but he neglects using it properly like the first two servants. He doesn't even hide it in the ground like the third servant. He uses it, let us imagine, to procure for himself a number of swords with which to engage in battle against the people of a nearby town, and, after that battle, there were, let us say, many injured and some dead. What would the Master have said to this fourth servant? Certainly, he wouldn't be very happy with this man either. In fact I think he would be even harsher with this fourth servant than he was with the third, because the third one simply refrained from using his talent out of fear, while the fourth used it to cause harm.

It is clear by now, I hope, that the fourth servant corresponds to what happens to us when we engage in war. In war, the world uses its talents, its resources, its intelligence and its various means of production, to destroy and kill rather than to construct and help. From God's point of view, it looks so senseless. It's as if creation is backfiring. We understand why the Vatican

Council document remarks: because we are sinners in this world, the threat of war hangs over us like a dark cloud.

The idea of a fourth servant highlights the negative side of the parable. There are other sides, of course. Consider the other two servants. What was their attitude? What can we learn from them? First of all, they were not afraid of their Master. It wasn't fear that directed their lives.

They were ready to take risks and profit from the talents the Master had given them. They were full of hope: hope that things would work out well; hope that their Master would understand. Jesus included these two servants in his story because they picture what he loved to see in his disciples. He didn't approve of the rigid and fixated mentality in the society lived in. He did not approve of a no-change mentality. What he wanted was a disciple full of creative fidelity: faithful to tradition but creative all the same. He didn't want disciples who just dug a hole in the ground and buried tradition there with the sole intention of passing it on to the next generation. He wanted disciples who make tradition flourish and bear fruit.

Questions for personal reflection and sharing:

1. In war, the Earth's resources are used wrongly. Do you see this happening sometimes within your own life, when considering the gifts you received yourself?
2. How often is your attitude towards God like that of the first two servants in the parable? How often is it like the attitude of the third? Is it ever like that of the fourth?
3. Does the idea of your future meeting with God face to face evoke fear, or hope, or some other emotion? Why?
4. What does creative fidelity mean for you?

Prayer

Oh Lord, giver of life and source of our freedom,
we are reminded by the Psalmist that Yours is
"the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it."
We know that it is from your hand that we have received all we have,
and are, and will be. Gracious and loving God,
we understand that You call us to be the stewards of Your abundance,
the caretakers of all You have entrusted to us.
Help us always to use Your gifts wisely and
teach us to share them generously.
May we be good stewards of this earth,
protecting the environment and using the gifts of this world wisely.
May our faithful stewardship bear witness to the love of Christ in our lives.
We pray with grateful hearts, in Jesus' name.
Amen