

Sermon in St. Wenceslas Cathedral, Prague at the Mass of Thanksgiving for the end of World War II, 5th May 2015.

Your Eminence, Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is hardly surprising that we have gathered here in St. Wenceslas Cathedral in Prague and throughout the Czech Republic to thank God for the end of the Second World War in 1945. No sensible person wants war. It always leads to untold suffering and to problems which last for generations afterwards.

There are, however, times when it is unavoidable as Pope Francis, our present Holy Father, is saying in regard to certain situations in the Middle East.

We have been told again and again that we have banished war. I came into being as the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. We were told that this would be the end of war. I lost relations in the war in Korea and we were told that this would end all wars. I protested about the war in Viet Nam as a student and again as an adult about the war in Iraq, but they still continued. We have had wars against whole peoples as with the Jews in the Second World War and also in Rwanda and in the Balkans. The list of wars seems to be unending.

We need to realise that the presence of violence and war always means that there is a human failure. That failure can be on a local level as when for whatever reason we, personally, must defend ourselves against an aggressor, or on a wider level, when some group attacks our own values and ways of life, not only in a disagreement on ideas and systems but wanting to impose their own system of values on us. The failure can be because of the lack of proper human relations between people, but also that between nations. Fear can be created by something that is “different” and we feel the need to defend, perhaps blindly, what we already have.

This latter point indicates something else which is often present in wars. That is the idea that the creation of a paradise on earth is possible, where all problems are solved, and all can live in harmony. It is then thought this can be enforced, at whatever cost, on other people. We saw this in the period before the Second World War with the rise of Fascism and you have experienced the same phenomenon in the imposition of Communism. This is impossible. This is not the way which God has created his world; it denies the dignity of every single human being as being made in the image and likeness of God. It seldom takes account of the reality of sin in our world and that it is the sin we are to fight against and not the sinner.

Our readings this evening show us what Christ revealed to us of the way our societies should be. The Beatitudes are a formula for a very different living together than the imposition of an ideology by force, or making people fearful. They call for the admission of weakness and of the things in our lives which we often do not like to admit: sorrow, poverty, injustice, meekness. They are not about selfishness but about justice, purity of heart, mercy and peace.

It is this which leads to the peace which only God can give as we read in the letter to the Philippians. In other words we are called by God to a society where we admit that there are things that are wrong. We try to live with them and correct them first in our own lives and

then in the lives of others. In this way we will experience the peace which only God gives as we realise that we more and more live in the presence of Almighty God.

The virtues which the beatitudes want to foster are never ending. Only in God will we find complete justice and mercy. Only in Him do we realise what peace really can be, only in Him do we find the strength and courage to be meek and to be persecuted. They are virtues which it will take a lifetime of God's grace to achieve, as they are in themselves beyond the capacity of any human being on his or her own.

People complain to me at times that their children or grandchildren cannot recite the ten commandments. I sometimes ask the person if they can recite the beatitudes. I have still not met anybody who can recite them at least in the same way as we perhaps recite the commandments. We are unfortunately more at home in what we should not do rather than in what we should be and do. The beatitudes are all encompassing, they never end and that means that we have to take them much more seriously than we would like. It is comparatively easy just to avoid a certain type of behaviour, but much more difficult to live each moment in a particular way. An English author and journalist from seventy years ago, G. K. Chesterton has said that it is not that Catholicism has been tried and found to be wanting, but that it has been found difficult and not been tried. The same could be said of the beatitudes: they have been found difficult and not been tried.

That brings us back to war. Ultimately wars are fought by people. Women and men are forced to believe, or are convinced, that this is the way forward. It seems easier, more straightforward. The constant daily effort of living a virtuous life seems boring and uninteresting in comparison with clear lines and clear actions, where I just do, rather than be, and have to reflect and take my own decisions. Yet the solution to war is to be found in those beatitudes. If I and my sisters and brothers really live them then there will be no war. I will be trying to be the type of person which the Beatitudes envision. I will be trying to conform myself in how I am, to the person God has created, and wants me to be. I will be looking to support my neighbour in their weakness. I will be trying to build up the Kingdom of God in this world not by force but by showing the love of God to myself and neighbour.

If we are really thankful for the ending of the Second World War then there is no better way of showing that than in living the Beatitudes. In doing that, in all my weakness as a human being, I will experience the peace which only God gives. I will have no need to be fearful of that which is different, because I will be held in the hand and mercy of God Himself, who created everything including the "different". I will have that experience because I will believe and know that I am performing the will of God, and that God is with me in everything that I am or do.

May God bless us all.

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