

November 2024: Saints and sinners

As I begin to write this article, news programs and countless emails from various charities are reminding me that it is exactly one year since the events that triggered the current atrocities in the Middle East. Yet, as we probably all know, those events did not come out of a vacuum; they were the consequence of a decades-old situation.

At times, probably all people of faith and all people of goodwill have wrestled with ideas about how to bring about a lasting solution, how to bring about lasting peace, in the troubled nations of the Middle East. Almost universally, Christians claim to be those who believe in peace, in justice, in reconciliation. But I suspect also almost universally, this belief becomes challenging when we try to work out what it might look like in practice. The Bible, and especially the Old Testament, teaches that true peace is not possible whilst there is injustice. In the current areas of conflict – and in countless other conflicts that do not make the news headlines - there can surely hardly be a life that has not been profoundly affected by actual or perceived injustices. And those seeking for a political solution are inevitably faced with those who see armed conflict as the only way forward.

Throughout history, Christianity has always had both those who believe that conflict is always wrong in all circumstances, and those who believe in the concept of a 'just war,' those who believe that in some circumstances 'the end can justify the means.' Both views are attempts to work out what Jesus' commands to 'love our enemies,' and to care for the needy and the vulnerable, might look like in a complex and imperfect world.

I have no answers. But as I wrestle with such 'big' problems two thoughts have been helpful for me. The first is that when I regard someone whose actions I believe to be evil, I remember that I cannot believe that God, who is good, has ever created a new born baby evil. So each such person is a product of both their life experiences and their choices, and so needs both our compassion and our prayers for their healing and transformation. The second thought is the Christian idea that there is both 'saint' and 'sinner' in each one of us. We are all capable of both great good and great harm. I may not be able to change the world, but I can look in my own heart for the seeds of greed and selfishness and fears, that lead me to seek my own way at the expense of others. And with God's help, I can change.

My prayer for us all this month is that we will not turn away from global news that we find distressing, but will join in the prayer of all those longing for a better world, all those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness.'

Yours in Christ,
Louise Petheram
rev.louise.p@gmail.com 01433 621918

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