FROM THE CHAIRPERSON – NAT REUSS

Greetings to you all at this year’s Conference – “The things that make for Peace.” For those who don’t know my name is Nat and I’m a Priest in the Diocese of Tasmania and Chair of APF.

Today, I would like to share with you some reflections on the use of the Bible in the debate on Pacifism and Just War and related to this, looking at the area of where does our authority lie for living non-violent lives.

Do you ever get the feeling with Church, that we are missing something? That our ethical positions (or non-ethical positions for that matter) are handed onto us through Traditions, Culture and dinner table talk, and regardless of how much we read scripture, we find Jesus’ voice turned down, ignored or obfuscated by our own cultural baggage.

Christian tradition in the West has held to the Just War Tradition as the Church’s main position on issues of war and peace. In so doing the Church has adopted a cultural artifact of pagan Greek philosophy as its main criteria for coming to a common mind on this issue. This has led to the blessing of acts of violence throughout Christian history that has served to blunt the witness of the Church both through its action and the spread of resulting public ridicule.

Now more than ever, the Church needs to discern a more faithful response to violence that will offer life-transforming hope for the world - a hope, that I find contained within its own scriptures - the Bible.

When I say the Bible, I’m conscious of a chorus of critics who would be quick to label me a “Fundamentalist” or some other derogatory name.

But from within its pages, we find a critic of the Church’s current majority stance and of violence itself - the person of Jesus Christ himself – fully God and fully human, who came teaching his followers to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matt. 5.44)

For far too long Jesus’ teaching in this area has been practiced by minority groups within the Christian tradition and small groups such as us within larger denominations. This needs to change. A peaceable witness needs to become the norm if the Church is to faithful to be Jesus Christ and a credible and life changing witness in the world.

But why has the majority Church not followed Jesus in this area of peacemaking and enemy love? In the main, Theologians and Church leaders have used a proof text approach to the Bible – picking and choosing their way to justify an acquiescence to violence in order to permit warfare and Christian participation in it.

Even the great Evangelical Exegete John Stott, takes a proof text approach, in his book, “*New Issues facing Christians today*.”

Pacifism is offered as an ethical stance based on the proof text of the Sermon-on-the-Mount. The Just War position is justified using a proof text of Romans 13, whilst Nuclear pacifism justified using the Old Testament text of Genesis 9:6 and its limitation for the shedding of blood.

This hermeneutic, or way of interpreting the Bible, is flatly inadequate for Christian approaches to ethics.

But it’s not just John Stott who uses this approach. Some of the West’s chief theologians, who have been Just War advocates right throughout the Church’s history, have followed this same method: Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Paul Ramsey have all made varied and isolated appeals to the Old Testament with little consideration given to the historical or canonical contexts. Consequently, these major Church theologians have justified Christians in armed service roles within their respective stages of Christendom culture.

Not only that, but because these theologians have always been citizens on the side of the powerful and wealthy; and that is to say - on the side of Empire. This has led to Jesus being put on mute throughout much of Western Christendom.

So what do we do about this?

Well, rather than take a proof texting or ‘direct instruction’ approach to Old Testament texts of violence and using these as justifying violence in the present day, I want to argue that we need to read the Bible as it asks us to read it.

The Bible is largely a narrative, so we follow the narrative flow of the Bible in order to understand the ongoing Bible story and how God’s continued action challenges our perceptions of Biblical violence. Indeed, some have said that the Bible itself makes ‘provision for its own critique’ on this matter.

When this is done, a new narrative begins to emerge. Rather than a story that encourages violence, we begin to see a peaceable trajectory emerging.

Through the Prophets in particular, we hear of a coming reign of God characterized by peace and justice. God is going to do something about the current state of the world and will inaugurate a reign where God is King and the world is full of peace and justice from God.

It is, ironically, within the very violent OT that this peaceable trajectory begins, before landing firmly in the New Testament. And it’s within the New Testament part of the story that we find ourselves invited into and called by God to live out lives marked by peacableness with one another and building for God’s Kingdom here on earth.

The Anglican Church makes its mind up using the three-fold basis of Scripture, Reason and Tradition. But often it’s the tradition of the Church that trumps scripture on this matter. I agree with having all three in continuing dialogue, but I would argue that insights gained from Tradition and Reason must be sifted and interpreted by Scripture and must be rejected if they conflict with Scripture.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, I’m still conscious that can make me sound like a fundamentalist. But here is the deal.

The authority of scripture doesn’t lie so much with scripture itself, but the God who is revealed in its pages. It’s Jesus himself, who becomes the authority over our life and the life of the Church.

So when it comes to ethics, we don’t pick and choose or play a game of “Top Trumps” with our favorite verses divorced from their canonical and historical contexts because the Bible doesn’t ask us to do that.

The Bible is a story of promise and fulfillment which asks to be read directionally and the Church needs to inhabit the story or ‘improvise’ the story by faithful Christian living in light of Jesus’ teachings, in the power of he Holy Spirit and in the knowledge that our lives are hid with his, sharing in the eternal life won for us.

That’s one level.

At another level, we live non-violent lives, not just in response to Jesus’ positive sayings, but because God rejected and subverted his own militaristic expectations placed on his life by scripture and subsequently, people’s expectations around him. A People yearning for a militaristic way out of their occupation under the Roman Empire.

This context is helpful, because it speaks to other cultures at times of occupation or invasion.

In the UK before WWII broke out, the Council of Christian Pacifist Groups met and C.H. Dodd and G.H.C. Macgregor published two addresses. Macgregor said,

“Moreover, Jesus’ words, however individual their immediate intention, cannot be isolated from the national circumstances in which they were spoken. All Jesus’ teaching must be read in the light of His claim to be Messiah, and to His countrymen the most striking thing about His Messiahship must have been His refusal to wage the expected Messianic war…”

Macgregor, rightly points out to a Nation soon to be at war, that Jesus himself, rejected the notion of war, even when his own scriptures imposed this function on him and at a time of occupation that had lasted several centuries under various regimes.

But returning to my point about the Kingdom of God, the hopes for military deliverance or ‘salvation’ from the pagan Gentiles was subverted by this other narrative - that of the Gentiles inclusion into God’s plans and God’s covenant people and this is the story that Jesus embodies in his life.

So the Bible critiques itself and offers a radical redefinition of the idea of salvation, that the Messiah actually fulfills as he proclaimed and demonstrated the breaking in of God’s Kingdom of Heaven upon earth.

It would come, not by violent overthrow, but through loving the enemy with a view to their inclusion into God’s new community – the Church.

This redefinition occurs most strikingly with the Sermon on the Mount. According to Tom Wright (1996, 188) the SOTM is “a challenge to Israel to *be* Israel.” To be the blessing to the nations that God original promised to Abraham in Genesis 12. The challenge to Israel is to throw off the nationalistic fervor and to be the people whom God initially called Abraham’s descendents to be. To be a people who bless, rather than take up arms against. This is the vocation now for the Church.

NT Wright writes,

“Evil would be defeated, not by military victory, but by a doubly revolutionary method: turning the other cheek, going the second mile, the deeply subversive wisdom of taking the cross. The agenda which Jesus mapped out for his followers was the agenda to which he himself was obedient. This was how the kingdom would come, how the battle would be won.”

How does the Church today live this way that some have described as creative non-violent resistance?

It’s imperative to know that through God’s revealed word in the Bible, history is on a trajectory of universal peace that will be fulfilled at the full inauguration of the Kingdom of God when Jesus returns. Meaning war and death is not the end! Jesus promises an end of suffering (Rom. 8.18-21) and death (Rev. 21.4). The old order will pass away and the resurrection of the dead will inhabit imperishable bodies (1 Cor. 15.35-58) who will inhabit creation forever. This is the direction that Salvation history, meaning history itself, is going.

Understanding and having this faithful Biblical meta narrative as our worldview, acts to remind us who is rightfully in charge of world affairs and who rightfully demands human allegiance.

According to Wright, “‘The ‘kingdom of god’, historically and theologically considered, is a slogan whose basic meaning is the hope that Israel’s god is going to rule Israel (and the whole world), and that Caesar, or Herod, or anyone else of their ilk, is not.” (Wright, 1992, 302)

We can add in of course, the passing spectres of our time. But the lesson is still the same – they are not in charge, God is.

So I hope this brief address has provided some much needed perspective particularly at this time. In a world where fear is rapidly spreading, the Church and the world, through the Church, needs constant reminding that it is God who reigns. Not just through his being God but because in his incarnate form he overcame evil, death and decay in his death and resurrection.

God is King over the whole world. God invites the allegiance of all people to share in the promise of new and life eternal and to build for His Kingdom in the here and now.

Thank you all for listening. May you have a blessed conference and may God guide as to living faithfully at this time.