

An Eye for an Eye

20 2 11

I've brought you something this morning, now my peace-loving children have left home ages ago, I've felt free to buy, a US Army Jeep. This vehicle was born in my home town, Detroit, Michigan (Motown), two years after me. 600,000 of these Jeeps were produced in the following years. My father was French-born but a US citizen and played cello for the Detroit Symphony. After the evening concerts, he would take a bus to a Vickers factory where he would work night shifts verifying the equipment that brought the huge navy shells to the guns on the destroyers. As a wounded veteran who had lost his elder brother in the War, he was President in Detroit of the French World War I veterans. He had served as a stretcher bearer. His brother, a promising artist, drew maps of the frontline! In Detroit, my father would bring young Free French trainee pilots to our home for meals.

'An eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth'

In our cellar, I remember the shelter with shelves stacked with tinned foods since the Germans were going to invade us! In those days, my mother would often say, 'Remember we are three quarter English and only one German.' This June, my first cousin Joan in Detroit reminded me that our ancestors from Missouri were Confederates. Just recently, she traced our ancestors to Pocahontas adding, 'My mother, your aunt, would have been shocked to discover we had Indian blood!' My childhood songs were, 'Anchors away!' (The Naval Hymn), 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' 'The Star-spangled banner'. I cried for Bambi when he lost his mother but the newsreels of the war were a regular part of my life !

My toys were tanks and guns, our favourite radio programme was 'Have gun will travel', a serial Western !

As I grew up, the front pages of our newspapers had maps of the collapsing Nationalist forces in China, the Korean War, Indochina and Dien Bien Phu, the Berlin Wall. War was the background of our loves, all kinds of wars.

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them your other cheek (5 v39)

The words that Jesus spoke, unnatural words. How can Christians deal with these words?

And first a family heritage. I discovered soon enough that my mother was wrong about her ancestors! 'Mother, your German ancestors are the ones you should be proud of! They left Prussia because they felt, as Mennonites, that their Christian faith constrained them to refuse to live in a society bent on war and conquest by force. They accepted to leave their loved ones, their beloved land to cross the seas. I have been graced to discover the strength of their convictions through a number of experiences!

1959 - my third year of theology in Austin Texas, Presbyterian Seminary.

'Eye for eye' If you are whiter you climb on the buses through the front door, if not use the rear door. If you are not the right colour, you will not be served in the university cafés. So a couple of us, different races, we would hold sit-ins for a

few hours, knowing that no one would come to our table. Months later, I realised that our modest efforts were in the much wider context of the movement that Martin Luther King came to symbolise. I will never forget meeting him in Lyon and translating his words at the reception at the Civic Centre.

'If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn, to them your other cheek!' (5 v39)

Martin Luther King! If you reply with violence, you increase your enemy's violence. If you resist in a non-violent manner, you can win him over. You can lead to a decrease in violence.

In Austin, a visiting German theologian, Dietrich Ritschl, (grandson of the famous theologian, Albrecht Ritschl) a cousin of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, led a seminar on Bonhoeffer's theology. In particular the writings from prison where he was awaiting his sentencing as part of the plot against Hitler. Bonhoeffer, in the spirit of 18th century Mennonites, called for a radical submission to Jesus' call for non-violent resistance. But then confronted by the ultimate evil of Hitler's system, he decided to oppose by all means the forces of destruction.

From Texas to Brazil for a student seminar organized just before the World Presbyterian Alliance meeting to discover the first talk of Latin American Christian involvement in the struggle of many for economic and social justice, the call for solidarity of the Churches with the downtrodden! One of the participants, who became a friend, Paulo Wright, was later arrested and murdered by security forces after the Brazil Military takeover. In the course of the seminar, Professor Hromadka from Czechoslovakia came to meet us and help us reflect on how a

Christian Peace movement could function in the context of the eastern European Communist states. This became the subject of a lot of controversy but played a great part in the deep changes in Eastern Germany as the Wall came tumbling down!

'You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you Love your enemies and pray for them who persecute you.' (5 v43)

1962–63 as a graduate theological student, I served in Algeria as an Assistant Chaplain for two years. How can one end a colonial war? How can armed forces be used to stand between two warring factions in a civil war? The end of the conflict was a failure since the minority fled the country on the eve of independence. As a Chaplain, I spent nights for a couple of weeks heating baby bottles with a coffee machine in the airport cafeteria the staff had abandoned. Night after night, thousands slept in the buildings and on the lawn awaiting daily evacuations.

After eight years of training and a pastoral ministry in the Rhone valley in January 1971, our family travelled to Zambia by ship and overland for a four year ministry in Trinity, United Church of Zambia. On our way, the discovery of the reality of apartheid and colonial remnants in South Africa and Rhodesia! Strife, tensions, the stand of courageous men such as Desmond Tutu in the struggle for change. Good men torn, between the choices of non-violent or violent means of resisting oppression.

In 1975, the enthusiasm of serving as head of language services for the All Africa Conference of Churches in Nairobi. As translator for the World Council of Churches Assemblies in Nairobi, Vancouver, Canberra and Harare over 25 years, I have seen the Church's involvement in a changing world, in a determined struggle for peace, justice and the integrity of the creation. What always struck me was the fact that these Assemblies were never out of this world. The great themes were woven into the daily lives of our congregations, peace building us a very basic, humble, caring, loving task – a caring community a teaching community, a worshipping community.

The last outstanding dates in my ministry relating to Peace were the Services we organised when I was a minister in Caen in 1994 for the 50th Anniversary of the Normandy Landing. On June 5th in Bayeux Cathedral, we held a truly ecumenical and international bilingual Vigil with the participation of Prince Andrew and the highest Church authorities. I had the English and French material available from the previous World Council services.

On a personal level, the fact that my eldest son is a senior civil servant of the European Union serving in Africa, in Zambia, serving a pacified, unified united Europe is an answer to the dreams and suffering of his grandfather, to the sacrifice of his great uncle!

I wouldn't trade these years. I feel like saying, 'Mine eyes have seen the coming of the Lord' as He has led us in the Ways of Peace and Justice. He is calling you,

today, where he has placed you, to be co-workers in his ministry of peace and reconciliation!

But I tell you Love your enemies and pray for them who persecute you.'

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

27th March, 2011

H: Sermon 23: Spiritual food

