PETER GARRETT MP

Member for Kingsford Smith
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Reconciliation and the Arts

---

Address to the St Thomas More's Forum - Campbell ACT

18/10/06

'Peacemaking for Christians in the 21st Century'

Thank you for the invitation to speak to the St Thomas More's Forum tonight.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land - the Ngunnawal people.

And I welcome Pope Benedict's statement last week that no one could be exempt from 'reconciliation' if Australia is to achieve a harmonious future.

I wonder if his Holiness was referring to anyone in particular?

We all share a universal response to the out of proportion suffering that war brings to the young who as soldiers come face to face with its horror, to women who bear the brunt of loss and often experience physical violence, and to the innocent civilian.

We share a collective history too.

The remembrance expressed in the War Memorial not far from here, in the Holocaust museum in Berlin, in the experiences of the Indigenous people in this country.

Peace is a word freighted up with meaning, encompassing an almost infinite and wide range of situations and experiences, as one writer put it "… to talk about peace is to evoke everything and nothing".

At its most basic we understand peace to mean the state where there is an absence of war; that is, where large scale violence is absent.

But it has come to mean, additionally, a state where there are sufficient conditions for a just society, the absence of which often leads to conflict.

The statistical evidence of the need for peacemaking in the world is overwhelming with vast amounts spent on armaments, and poverty a fact of life for 1.3 billion people.

It is self evident that peacemaking in all its guises is as important today as it has ever been.

And there is a tradition of peacemaking, which includes thinking seriously about war, that Christians have long followed and which continues to be relevant in the present.

It is true that there is much in the history of the Christian church, including the Catholic Church, that has seen violence committed in the name of God; historical acts now recognised as error.

But for centuries many Christians, including those indomitable peacemakers the Quakers, have wrestled with, and tried to follow the words of Jesus to "turn the other cheek, and to love your enemies".

Out of such succinct but tough teaching, peacemaking is held to be a requirement for the Christian life.

The Parliament I entered in 2004 has many people of Christian faith serving in it, but it is going through a very martial phase.

The House of Representatives often pauses, as it should, to remember those who sacrificed, and sacrifice, their lives in war.

But it seldom reflects deeply on the issues of Australia's future peacemaking role in relation to the ongoing violence that plagues the world.

The government offers continuing and unqualified support for the war in Iraq. It emphasises every announcement concerning possible threats to security, knowing that in uncertain times by looking strong on terror it can take an advantage and enforce an impression that the Labor opposition is weak.

In fact the mantra of the Minister for Foreign Affairs is to repeat that phrase, plus a few others that sound pithy but mean nothing, and to persist in the conceit, that notwithstanding the small size of our deployment in Iraq, we can wield real influence in the Middle East.

In fact Iraq has become a terrible quagmire, with a full blown civil war raging and hundred of citizens being killed everyday. Current estimates put the total between 43,000 and 49,000 people.

The United Nations is often dismissed; unless, of course, as in the case of the immediate crisis concerning North Korea, where they are called upon to fix the problem immediately.

In short, my experience is this government tends always to play domestic politics with war, and rarely focuses deeply on what is needed to bring the world closer to peace.

The history of the 20th century - with approximately 170 million war dead, the majority of these due to wars within states, weighs down on this generation.

It isn't easy to respond to this past nor to build models for a peaceful future in an age where people are willing to blow themselves up, as well as innocent others, and where nuclear weapons breakouts threaten the stability of the international order.

In Australia these questions are especially pertinent since the commitment to a long running and expensive war in Iraq, last count $1.9 billion and rising, a war that has added to, not lessened the terrorist threat.

Interestingly the issue of the conduct of this war now permeates public debate in two out of the three nations that make up the 'coalition of the willing', to the extent that the political future and the historical record of both President Bush and Prime Minister Blair are being assessed in the light of the failing Iraq excursion.

Since the outset of the war when many people, myself included, marched in opposition, the debate about Iraq hasn't reached the same level of intensity as it has in other countries, although Labor is pressing the issue hard in Parliament. The distance, and thankfully the absence of significant Australian casualties, puts Iraq at one remove.

But the questions that have long been raised about the legitimacy of the reasons for going to war in Iraq need to be answered. Especially when the justifications offered: finding weapons of mass destruction, pursuing Saddam Hussein, containing terrorism, building a democratic Middle east, have in all cases bar one, been found wanting.

There is a continuing flood of reassessments by senior military officers, new intelligence reports and books including Bob Woodward's *State of Denial* that point to evidence of conspicuous policy failure concerning Iraq.

And we now have to seriously ask whether in taking up this war - characterised as a war against terrorism - we've left behind the basic

principles that govern the conduct of war and those democratic values and legal protections that the campaign in Iraq is ostensibly aiming to protect.

I should take this opportunity to speak on the values debate at this point, which has been in the news of late, in relation to three contemporary elements of the involvement of Christianity in politics.

First, there is a fair amount of fuzziness about where the line of demarcation between church and state, that is the separation of church and state, lies.

This separation is a principle I firmly believe in, while also believing that someone's personal values should and do inform one's day to day thought processes and decision-making.

But there is way too much selective following of the rule nowadays by this government. It invokes the authority and wisdom and so-called legitimate involvement of the church in politics and policy-making when that involvement is pro-government policy.

And the Howard Government directly uses various congregations and speeches to them to promote government policies; but when the church points out human rights and humanitarian values "shortcomings" and "failures" of the government, for example in relation to refugee policy, then the church is loudly deemed to have no place in such discussions and told, often not so politely, to go away quietly.

Second, it is very much "do as I say, not as I do" with this government.

It falsely promotes itself as having a monopoly on "Christian" values and upholding a set of ethics and principles which are in strict keeping with those values - yet its actions do not accord with them.

What is 'Christian' about the treatment of David Hicks? What is 'Christian' about the treatment of asylum-seekers? What is 'Christian' about believing that sleep deprivation and other harsh treatment of arrestees is not torture?

Finally, let's by all means have a discussion about personal values, and Christian values, and humanitarian values, without the strong suggestion that there is only one correct set of them - the set the government claims sole ownership of - and anyone of any other religion, opinion or general set of beliefs is sidelined, or, at best, "tolerated", but certainly not respected or accepted.

The spectre of the West being involved in or effecting the use of torture, the forceful removal of suspected terrorists to countries not connected with the war to enable interrogation outside the legal systems of Western countries, and the imprisonment of alleged terrorists without proper legal process are troubling many lawyers, church leaders and members of the public.

So what should our response be in these circumstances?

Other than the formal interaction between nations through the United Nations and the Security Council, there is a range of approaches that might be described as the antidotes to war, in other words, peacemaking.

These include initiatives both through the UN and its agencies and other international organisations, and at the personal level inter-faith dialogue between religious groups, citizen to citizen exchanges to increase understanding.

There is a host of options and actions that can bear fruit. And here the role of Non Government Organisations (NGOs) who provide the heavy lifting in aid relief and community building in war torn regions is critical.

It is undeniable that organisations like Caritas, World Vision, the Red Cross and a host of others bring expertise and compassion to bear in troubled parts of the globe.

Their work, including their advocacy for the poor and those caught in the cross fire of violence, is of enormous value.

Standing up for peace, reconciliation and healing where peace has been absent often means working with communities through long days and nights, as for example Australian Catholic nuns did, and still do, for the people of Timor Leste during their darkest hours and as they continue the difficult task of rebuilding their nation.

At all times the exercise of citizen's voices both here and overseas, and the involvement they have with the political processes of their country, is the oxygen that breathes life into peacemaking.

My reading of Jesus' call to turn the other cheek, is that not only is it a clear rebuttal of the literality of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but it is also a practical insight into how arguments that justify the use of violence on the grounds that violence has already occurred can be countered.

It is a fact that it is that much harder to break a cycle of violence, once retribution has started.

The injunction to love your neighbours and pray for those who persecute you meant the early Christian writers, in the main, were clear that violence and war making was unchristian.

This 'just war' principle evolved to address the question of what happens when there is a greater evil that will be committed if violence is not countered.

Developed by the Christian fathers, fleshed out by thinkers like Grotius, affirmed by St Thomas Aquinas, and articulated in Catholic teachings it remains a cornerstone of the Christian response to war.

In its most general description the justification of the use of violence, let alone go to war, is grounded in the rights of states to exercise order through maintaining armies. The state possesses the right to self defence, where the use of force is a last resort.

There are a number of important qualifications including the need to aim to minimise civilian casualties, of the desirability of a short engagement, of ensuring the injured are given prompt treatment. All of which have been emasculated in the majority of wars in the modern era.

But Christian doctrine is not comfortably numb to the scenario of unmitigated, unlawful aggression.

Even Gandhi, the champion of non violence, demurred that sometimes violent resistance to evil was better than no resistance at all.

And Bonhoeffer, the great Christian pacifist my colleague Kevin Rudd wrote about recently joined the plot to assassinate Hitler.

We need to remember that Christian doctrine is embedded in the just war principles, not only because the principles inform our assessments about war and peace, and how to address these matters, in ways a utilitarian approach of balancing means and ends cannot so easily do.

But also because the current outbreak of wars, means we need better, more effective peacemaking mechanisms which operate at the international, state and personal level.

And here one of the crux issues is pre-emption, when a state launches an attack when it is not directly threatened.

According to Grotius, "The bare possibility that violence may be some day turned on us (and) give us the right to inflict violence on others is a doctrine repugnant to every principle of justice."

I would say it is clear that the so called doctrine of pre-emption which has been accepted by Mr Howard in relation to the war in Iraq is contrary to the principles of a just war as understood by Christians.

Unilateral pre-emption throws off the bounds of containment within which any nation operates in relation to others, and which is implicit in the Sermon on the Mount message; namely do unto others as you would have them do unto you (not before they do it to you) and explicit in the accepted rules of international law.

It is worth recalling that the establishment of a kind of international order organised by secular states, through the Treaty of Westphalia, out of which accepted rules of engagement for war, including refinements of the just war principles, emerged in the late Middle Ages after a period of constant squabbling and conflict between city states and kings with their private armies.

And this happened, as it turns out, a hundred years or so after Thomas More was locked in moral and ultimately mortal combat with Henry the Eighth.

As Brian Edgar has observed, at the time the new states were no longer indulging in religious conflicts but reserved the right to wage war, and eventually, having reduced the prerogative of the king to go to war when he wished, even allowed people to opt out of fighting.

Over time and with the horror of the so called Great War of 1914-18 etched in their memories nations aimed to create an international system which could further regulate international affairs and lessen the likelihood of war.

The League of Nations emerged, then failed, but following the Second World War in 1945 the United Nations was established with a Charter which declares that the maintenance of international peace and security to be the primary purpose of the UN.

Interestingly part of this evolution of thinking and practice I've just sketched included at its beginning a repudiation of the prerogative of the king to wage war - 'ultima ratio regum' - the very kind of prerogative that was enacted in the decision to invade Iraq.

So from this compressed history story we come to a new cross roads, for the exercise of the war in Iraq has meant that the principles that govern war making have been thrown over. And the Christian response should be to challenge this reversal of principle and practice.

In the meantime the existing just war framework can serve as a basis to develop new peacemaking actions where justice and commitment to the poor is central.

And here what better example than the world wide 'Make Poverty History Campaign', which originated out of the movement for Jubilee Debt Relief and others, and involved numerous young people, including many Christians, and which resulted in the UN adoption of the Millennium Development Goals.

The rule breaking that defines Christ's mission as recorded in the gospels is the ushering in of an age where peace is pre-eminent, not one where war is justified.

We shouldn't lose sight of this mission as we contemplate peacemaking in the new century.

Ends