

Lent and Four Years of Unjust War

“There is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people.” (Howard Zinn, historian)

Here we are in the season of Lent, when Christians traditionally focus on their need for confession and repentance. Our weekly community Lenten services are proceeding, with the theme of repentance. Of interest, some church bodies are even entering into repentance for 100+ years of church support for slavery.

Coming soon will be the fourth anniversary of the official beginning of the Iraq War. It seems appropriate to look closely at the War and how it fits into Lent. As of this writing, over 3175 U.S. service men and women have died, and up to 30,000 have come home injured and maimed. The mothers and fathers, spouses, children and families of these casualties are devastated by the tragedy.

According to the Johns Hopkins University Report, as of July 2006 more than 650,000 Iraqi citizens have died, including 54,000 children. Other studies have reported different figures. Whatever the actual death toll, the figures include mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, doctors, lawyers, taxi drivers, teachers, laborers, office workers and many others. In addition, we have demolished the country with four years of “shock and awe,” cruise missiles, thousands of sorties, and ground fire. To use the Hopkins figures, 655,000 people amount to more than two hundred 911's. The death toll represents two and one half per cent of the population of Iraq. The same percentage applied to the United States would total 7,500,000 dead Americans.

In addition to those killed, the number of injured and maimed Iraqis could be two times or five times or x times those numbers. Clearly, the human cost of the war represents massive carnage of innocent people, all resulting from an unjust, dishonest, illegal and immoral war

The U.S. and Iraqi death toll weighs heavy upon my heart and soul. We have massive and monstrous innocent blood on our hands. After the Hopkins report came out I lived with the specter of these deaths and the lack of Christian response during the night, and it was there in the mornings when I awoke and on my mind during the days and days. I was sitting at a table in a restaurant with my wife at a birthday lunch (mine), weeping and disconsolate.

Regarding the Vietnam War Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke eloquently about “silence as complicity”; about “silence as betrayal”.

We can praise God for the many persons and religious leaders who have condemned the war as dishonest, illegal and immoral. In November of 2005 over one hundred of our United Methodist retired and active bishops (not including our own bishop) called for confession and repentance in the church for the evil we have done and continue to do in Iraq.

When I asked his thinking on the confession statement our own Bishop replied: "It has not been my practice to show and tell my responses to any Council of Bishops resolution or document." I do not believe this is a helpful or an adequate response from a church leader to church people struggling with faith and war issues. I feel that by his determined avoidance of the war our Bishop has officiated at the marginalizing of Jesus Christ. To me he is denying by his silence any relevance of our savior to the evil of this war, conducted in our name.

Strong language? How else are we to deal with the enormity of hundreds of thousands of innocent dead Iraqis without widespread outrage from the church; without moral accountability for our complicity in the carnage; without confession and repentance?

Now it's Lent. RCA General Secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, the UMC bishops, and many other religious leaders and people have led the way by condemning the war. But I believe no matter if or when the war should stop, the United States Christian church at large will never be off the hook of complicity with the war through its overt or silent support. It may last decades or one hundred years, but without confession and repentance, I believe there is and will be an abscess on the Christian body. It will give continuing witness to its compromise (betrayal?) of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

"An unjust, illegal, dishonest and immoral war can never be hidden behind the cross."
(PEB)

Philip E. Beal
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