



# Bristol Cathedral

## Just War

Last Monday there was a requiem at Norham Parish Church. It marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Flodden. Flodden isn't a date that sticks in English history; it's not a Hastings, or a Dunkirk sort of date. The Scots though do not forget 9<sup>th</sup> September 1513. The Scottish King and the ruling class of Scotland, the Earl of Argyll, the Earl of Montrose, the Earl of Errol, the Earl of Caithness, the Earl of Bothwell... all of them and many more died that day. There is a famous lament:

*The Flooers o' the Forest, that fought, aye the foremost,  
The pride o' oor land lie cauld in the clay.*

In just two hours of fighting something like 15,000 men were killed. Flodden sets a grim benchmark: the last king to die in battle on English soil, the worst rate of attrition until the first hour on the Somme.

And the thing to notice is that Flodden is remembered by the Scots because it was a defeat. Boys' stories, the kind of thing I read when I was eight or nine, are all about banners and glory, but what sticks with us, as we get older, are the tragedies: Passchendaele and the Somme, Hiroshima, Dresden and the Blitz. It is the horror of war that stays with you afterwards.

We have had lessons in horror thanks to Iraq and Afghanistan and it is making us think again. Mr Cameron and Mr Obama have both been wrong footed in the last month because we are getting suspicious of conflict. There are all kinds of arguments being made about what we should or should not do about the atrocities in Syria. I have heard people say that we do not have all the facts, or that we cannot predict the outcome of more violence, or that we might only make things worse. There has been a tide of words about what is possible and what is wise. What I have not heard much discussed is the *morality* of war. Only the Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking in the Lords, has raised the question of a *Just War* with Syria. He thinks that is a question worth asking. What would a Just War look like? In all the talk about Syria it is worth spending a few minutes with this.

Christians have been asking if wars are *Just* for 1500 years. After refining the arguments, some head scratching and staring out of the window looking thoughtful theologians would now say that before we go to war we should ask ourselves six questions.

1. **Do we have Just cause?** It is technical language, let's think of an example. If I call the Chapter Clerk names and push rude notes under her door she would be upset, but it would be wrong of her to come and biff me on the nose. That would not be *justified*. If I attacked her with a stapler however, she really ought to defend herself. That would be a just cause. We should not go to war because we want oil or land. We should perhaps only go to war to protect innocent life. In the case of Syria, when politicians talk about teaching President Assad a lesson, or punishing him, that is not Just Cause. If we really believe that we can and must protect the civilian population that might be. That's the first question you have to ask, is there a just cause?
2. The second question is about **Competent authority**. If I tell the vergers that I have been putting snails and slugs in the Chapter Clerk's desk they will be outraged and she (by now) will be getting really quite irate. The vergers might want to stop me, but that doesn't mean they would be right to clout me with the Dean's mace. No one should take the law into their own hands. If you want to deal with the Dean you go to the Bishop. When it comes to Syria, the UK or the US could declare war on Syria if Syria attacked either of them. That is why President Obama has been talking about events in Syria as a threat to national security; he is trying to argue this is like an attack on us. The

truth is no one can declare war on Syria because they are cross with President Assad. Only the UN can do that. The UN is the competent authority.

3. The Chapter Clerk is in a bit of a bate. She needs counter measures because the Dean has just taken the chair out of her office and hidden it. Even so, as she picks up a baseball bat, she must ask what is her aim? Does she have a **Right intention**? Right intention is really important. Getting her own back, or getting a dead Dean might feel better, but would it be right? What she really needs to do is to put right the wrongs. When you go to war because you want revenge you do not have a right intention. If you want to punish Syria, that is not a right intention. If you can stop chemical weapons and help those who have been made ill, that would be a right intention.
4. And, then, as the Chapter Clerk stands at her desk, because there is nowhere to sit, and watches the slugs and snails, she has to ask what will happen if she goes to war with the Dean. Is there a **Probability of success**? The Dean is devious and the Dean has powerful friends. Can she win? It would be wrong to start a war if the end is even worse than the beginning. It is hesitation about the probability of success that has been one of the major arguments against an attack on Syria. If President Assad stays in power and if the war goes on after some sort of limited strike what kind of success would there be?
5. The Dean has just let down the tyres on her car and this is beyond a joke. Who can blame the Chapter Clerk for slipping a carving knife into her handbag? Even now though she must stop and ask is this really the **Last resort**? Has she talked to the Dean and appealed to his better nature? Has she asked Canon Robert to intercede? This too has been a critical bit of the conversation about Syria. In the House of Lords debate there was a lot of talk about other options including the idea that Syria should be asked to hand over its chemical weapons. War must be a last resort.
6. Last of all, as she plans to push the Dean from the tower the Chapter Clerk must reflect on **Proportionality**. What a mess this makes on College green, what a sad and unhappy place the Cathedral will be without the Dean. How the Lay Clerks will weep and tear their surplices. How the Bishop would be downcast. And all for the sake of a few slugs and snails. Proportion matters. A limited war in Syria could lead to a bigger conflict and thousands of death could become tens of thousands. The result would be worse than anything we have seen so far.

That is Just War theory. It asks are questions that need to be asked. It does not answer every question. You could argue that the idea is a non-starter, all war is, by definition, the thing you do when morality has failed. A pacifist would say that. Personally, I am of the view that Jesus taught us that evil must sometimes be opposed, but that's a sermon for another day.

You could also ask if all this is a little out of date. At Flodden with spears and billhooks they killed 15,000 in a couple of hours. We now have the capacity to kill millions in a very short space of time. If we fight with all the implements of cruelty we now possess war can never be proportional and never have a right intention. That though is a separate issue. First we must decide if we ought to fight in Syria or elsewhere and then other decisions follow about how that might be done.

These are big issues and big questions. For today it is enough that we think about these things and consider those questions: a just cause, a competent authority, a right intention, a probable success, a last resort and proportional.

We will finish with that lost sheep we heard about in the gospel (Luke 15:1-10). That story is a reminder that Christ believed that no one and no thing should ever be considered lost. No one and no thing is ever utterly beyond our reach. The story of the lost sheep is not just a story about God's compassion; it is an absolute assertion that we belong together; we are diminished when we are divided. In the last few weeks, when there has been so much talk about the renegade who should be punished, about drawing a line in the sand and making a judgement Christ stands before us and asks us instead how the lost can be gathered in again and how separation can be overcome.