

Chapel Reflections on the Start of the Iraq War

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This is an occasion, I am sure, that all of us have hoped would never come. With every effort to prevent a military invasion of Iraq now having failed, we find ourselves meeting with a full scale war underway and the misery that it brings. For those who will most bear the brunt of the misery there is, of course, no time for reality television or academic discussion such as this. For the people on the ground in Iraq, the Iraqi population and the men and women of the Allied forces ordered there into battle—whose average age is younger than that of most graduate students—the demands of this hour are more immediate and in many ways, no doubt, beyond our comprehension. We must mean more than a platitude to say, in the first instance, that our prayers are for all who at this moment are suffering and dying and directly threatened—and for those who are trying to end the carnage and to care for them.

The ten minutes that Dean Keller has invited us to speak set a useful limit that forces us to concentrate our attention on what each of us sees as most crucial to our vocational situation. The assignment has led me to question my own theological responsibility and what this task calls for at the present time.

I confess that I have a very low tolerance for talk as rationalization about suffering, especially my own talk. Day and night finds no lack of “talking heads” on television delivering their opinions. Preachers exchange their sermons, retired generals boast of our latest weapons, academics rush into publication, politicians do their photo-ops. It all strikes me sometimes as exploitation—using the pain of others to increase our own particular network ratings. The most important witness to me after Nine Eleven came not so much from speeches or learned articles but from two business friends of mine whose task it was to determine who was alive and who was missing among the hundreds of employees in their firm at the World Trade Center. For days and many nights they worked over employee lists, calling families, checking and rechecking, with no time for talk about their agonizing or the “much speaking” (Mt. 6:7) going on around them. They simply turned to the immediate task at hand.

There comes a time and place when faithful witness *does* call for speaking, and then we pray that it will not be idle chatter but a word that is needful, a word that conveys more power than our own. A statement from the book of *Acts* regarding Paul before King Agrippa has often seemed to me to epitomize such crisis situations. As Luke recounts the scene, Paul says, “**And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors**” (Acts 26:6). I call this verse to mind as one brief way of noting what strikes me as several of the most crucial points of a faithful calling.

1. “AND NOW I STAND HERE.”

Each of us is called to faithful witness in the unique set of circumstances that comprise our particular gifts and time and space. A faithful stance requires watchful waiting, but it is never apathy or simply standing still. Some of us have been active in protests. Some have spoken and written and lobbied. Some crisis situations lead to civil disobedience, or in Bonhoeffer’s words, to “jamming the spoke in the wheel.” Some are called to stand in positions of government policy making and influence. Some stand in the military and others in opposition to military force. All of us who confess biblical faith confess that wherever we find our unique opportunity we stand under the grace and judgment of God.

One responsibility of theology at the present time is to make us more aware of the history of moral reflection in Christianity concerning war. This history contains a variety of positions. One is the rejection of all military force. Some groups argue that war is the natural state of things in a fallen world and will only cease at the end of time when Christ returns. Military force in defense of just causes, the so-called “just war theory,” has been the majority Christian position. Stipulations are drawn to define what is just and what isn’t. With the coming of the three great periods of the Crusades in the late 11th through the 15th Centuries (1095–1464), a new rationale was given for warfare in that merit was said to accrue for military death. The allowance of conscientious objection on specific grounds represents another stance, and in modern times with Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others the issue of non-violent versus violent resistance has received much attention. The stance of so-called “Christian realism,” that is associated with the name of Reinhold Niebuhr in this place, accommodates the love ethic to what the approximation of justice in a social situation allows. But all of these historical stances now have their critics and may be said to be on trial.

2. “AND NOW I STAND HERE ON TRIAL.”

My own work has been influenced by the question raised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1933 when the Nazi movement came to power. “What should the student of theology do today?” Bonhoeffer answered that the student “should prepare through study to test the spirits in the Church of Christ.” Christian claims are called to testing, called to trial. The current situation reminds us of the urgency of testing all God-talk and the uses to which piety, especially professions of Christian piety, are being put by the churches, but also by secular society. From ancient times the relation of a peoples’ worship with their patriotism has been recognized by governing authorities in preparing their populations for war. For months we have witnessed the altering of public consciousness and sensibility to accept as inevitable the government’s policies. Testing the spirits takes on much greater urgency in an internet culture where the grasp of reality is increasingly subject to media manipulation. Theological responsibility at the present time

requires testing the spirits in the church, but it also calls for bringing all propaganda to trial as well.

A specific responsibility of theological work at this time, it seems to me, is a deeper and more critical awareness of the uses being made of the Bible in our churches, our academic studies, and in our public discourse. Liberals are no less in need of this critical awareness than are conservatives. We all have our vested interests, our blind spots, and our sacred cows. There are, I venture to say, more theological themes being raised in our newspapers, television, and social media these days than in many of our churches. What constitutes a faithful hearing and discernment of this talk? Who is to say, we ask, what word, if any, *God* is speaking?

Much has been made since Nine Eleven of passages in the Koran that are alleged to call for warfare against outsiders, the infidels. What, we Christians must ask ourselves, shall we say of our biblical Psalm 137, "*O daughter Babylon, you devastator. Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!*" (Ps. 137:8–9) The footnote to this passage in our *New Oxford Annotated Bible* informs us that the term "daughter Babylon" is to be understood as a reference to "the Babylonian people". Theology is responsible for bringing itself continually to trial, or better, for recognizing that it is continually under judgment and being tested and brought to trial.

3. "AND NOW I STAND HERE ON TRIAL *FOR HOPE IN THE PROMISE* MADE BY GOD TO OUR ANCESTORS."

If the message of the Gospel calls us to oppose *credulity*—simply believing without testing everything that claims to be of God—it must also be said just as emphatically to oppose *cynicism*—simply denying as unrealistic any claim of a trustworthy hope currently coming from God. And cynicism may be an even greater temptation to some of us in this place than credulity in our present situation. Any protest that is not grounded in a trustworthy hope is not only self-defeating, it is self-destructive and a betrayal of others as well.

My e-mails, like some of yours I am sure, in recent days have been full of messages from pastors in various places sharing information for the worship services being held all over this country. Some recommend materials for condemning the war policies of the government. Some carry reports from missionaries, and church groups, and others in the Middle East. Some denominations are calling upon all local churches to undertake joint meetings with Jews and Muslims at this time. Some churches providing pastoral care to military families are distributing names of the troops so that they can be prayed for specifically one by one.

The most crucial word in all this activity and in the activity of this seminary as well, it seems to me, is one that may come *through* us, but will not come *from* us. We have no power of our own to raise the dead. In the real world we have no strength in ourselves to give hope to Rachel in her refusal to be consoled. Rather,

we have been given an unlikely promise to signify; as the prophet Jeremiah hears it coming to Rachel, "'There is hope for your future,' says the Lord." (Jer. 31:17)

The call to stand here and now "on trial for hope in the promise" in whatever may be the "terror of the night...and the destruction that wastes at noonday" (Ps. 91:5–6) when all is said and done, it seems to me, is the one word that is most needful.