

SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY LENT3a; 8/3/2026
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JUST WAR

In the light of what's been happening in the World recently, I've been thinking about warfare and what that means. So I have investigated some of our Christian traditions to do with war. I hope you find this helpful, especially as we see the destruction on our TVs every night.

Way back in the early days of the Christian faith there was a question asked. The question was:

Is there such a thing as a just war?

In other words:

Is there ever a good reason for going to war, and if there is, how do we decide on that?

You may recall that the first Christians were pacifists which made them a bit of a target for the Roman Empire. In the Roman Empire you could be conscripted to do some military service against your will at any time. Christians were bucking the trend, by refusing the call.

So should we follow the traditions of our ancestors? Should we all be pacifists?

Back then there was a problem, because the emperor Constantine had become a Christian in 312AD. He was a military ruler.

So the Christians were wondering:

Can you have a military ruler as a Christian? Or

Should all in the military become pacifists?

Constantine, marched his armies through the rivers to baptise them on mass! I'm not sure if they were all asked the question: *Do you turn to Christ?* or not, but that is what happened. So in name, at least, the soldiers were changed from being pagans to Christians. So should they give up fighting as well?

But they were still soldiers. So can you have soldiers who are pacifists? Maybe so, but I'm not sure it works very well for the military!

So Constantine was wondering how to get his Christian army to fight in a war, and he made them do it anyway!

Later, the now famous saint, saint, Augustine (354-430 BCE) was asked to find a solution to the problem. He was one of the most brilliant people at that time, and probably still is one of the cleverest people who lived in history.

So he was asked:

Can Christians fight a just war?

He came up with two categories to answer the question. The Latin terms are

- 1) into *jus ad bellum* (justice in going to war) and
- 2) *jus in bello* (justice in the conduct of war)

He said we need to look at when is it right to engage in war, but also how we should conduct ourselves in the war.

In terms of *justice in going to war* he developed the following principles.

- 1) The war must be declared by lawful authorities (a government or a recognised ruler) It is not just to have people going to war “willy-nilly”.
- 2) There must be a just cause. That is, there must be a good reason why you go to war. Typically to defend yourself, at the violation of a treaty, or to stop some other evil that's greater than the war itself.

Thomas Aquinas later in the 13th century (1225-1274 BCE) added a third principle;

- 3) The war should have the right intention: typically to find peace at the end.

So these were the three principles that needed to be considered before Christians should go to war or not.

In in the 1970s, the Catholic Bishops of the United states added some more principles:

- 4) The war must have a just cause. Here they just underlined what had already been said.
- 5) Both sides must be compared That is, both antagonists' claims need to be compared for legitimacy.
- 6) The war must be a last resort. You must not go to war unless all forms of negotiation have failed
- 7) If you choose to go to war you should expect to win. You must not go to war to lose-this is considered evil . You go to war to win with a view to it ending. If you are not going to win, or there's not going to be an end, what's the point? Or as many a parent has said to a child : “*Don't start something you can't finish .*”
- 8) The war must be proportional. In other words, you don't go to war with your whole army if you are being threatened by a smaller force. It must be proportional-or in the school situation a big fellow should not be bullying a small fellow.

So those are some principles on whether we should go to war or not.

There must also be justice in a way the war is conducted.

Someone once said:

That soldiers should act as warriors not as Barbarians.

The conduct of the war must be proportional, and the soldiers' conduct should be proportional. It should not be excessive. No more force should be used other than what is necessary. Or putting it another way: Are the combatants fighting ethically?

The second principle of Justine in the context of war was that non-combatants were immune from the fighting. The army did the fighting for the civilians, and the civilians were not meant to be involved in the fighting. The Second World War put an end to that principle and it's continued on ever since. As we look at our televisions we see just how civilians sufferer at the hands of an invading force.

Thomas Aquinas also developed the principle of *jus post bellum* or *Justice after the war*. This notion was also fine-tuned after the Second World

- 1) Things must be restored to the way they were. A new peaceful normal must be established. For example, buildings reconstructed.
- 2) Those who committed war crimes should be tried and punished.
- 3) Victims must be compensated. We see claims continuing to this day.
- 4) There must be peace treaties.

So in summary, longstanding principles of the Christian faith ask

- 1) Is it justified to go to war,
- 2) Is the war being fought ethically, and
- 3) Is there proper restoration after the war?

I know we could discuss the situation in many places at length, and wonder if these principles are being followed or not. You might want to do that, but that's not my purpose today.

I'd like us to think a little closer to home.

Are you at war with someone?

Is this a person, a company, a situation or are you at war within yourself?

Take a moment to think about that.

You might like to ask these questions about your personal war.

- 1) Is the war lawful?
- 2) Asking yourself very carefully if you have a just cause. Maybe you don't and you're just being annoying?

- 3) Are both sides being fair? Especially yourself?
- 4) Is your war the last resort? Have you exhausted all the possibilities of negotiation?
- 5) Are you bringing more evil into the world than good?
- 6) Will your war have an end- can you describe it?

As I ask that question and my thoughts immediately go to the people of the Middle East. They've been at war with each other for thousands of years and I ask myself:

When will it end?

- 7) If you are in a war with someone or a situation, are you behaving ethically?
For example. Not being a bully and not inviting non-combatants into the fight.
- 8) Can you look ahead and see the time when it will be a new peaceful normal?
- 9) Are you willing to take on the consequences of any stupidity on both sides?
Especially yourself. That's a hard one!

So, having said all this, it's good to know that our forebears wrestled with our similar questions.

Let's be thankful that people like Augustine who thought about these difficult matters and gave us some principles to guide our thinking and decision making.

Finally a quote from Jesus:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

(Mtt: 5.9, NRSV)

But he never said it would be easy!

The Lord be with you.