

Hear a just cause – Testimonies of Peace
Hiroshima Day & Reflection, 6 August 2017 by Paul Barber

Readings

Matthew 14:13-21; Psalm 17:1-7,15

Contemporary reading “The nuclear bomb is a weapon of crime and mass destruction’ Roland Oldham, Moruroa e Tatou, Tahiti

It is now 72 years since the nightmare of nuclear warfare was unleashed on the civilian population of Hiroshima. On 6th August 1945 the atomic bomb euphemistically named “Little Boy” was dropped on the city with a population around the size of Wellington. The explosion and resulting fires and radiation killed an estimated 135,000 people – no-one is sure exactly how many people died. Three days later the city of Nagasaki was targeted killing another 65,000 civilians. Today thousands of people still live with the effects of the radiation passed onto their children and grandchildren

It is just over 51 years since the first atomic bomb test on Mururoa Atoll in Maohi Nui (French Polynesia) – the first of a total of 193 tests carried out over the following 25 years. Few of the workers and families affected by cancers and other related illnesses have received compensation. Last year the Maohi Protestant Church decided to take France to the International Criminal Court alleging crimes against humanity.

Roland Oldham, spokesperson from Moruroa e Tatou says, “I would say that the story of nuclear will never end. We know when it started but we don’t know when it’s going to end.”¹

In January this year, the Doomsday Clock moved half a minute closer to midnight - closer to nuclear nightmare than the world has been for more than 30 years, since the end of the Cold War. A group of atomic scientists has been updating it for 70 years since the beginning of the nuclear era. In moving the clock closer to midnight, they said:²

“Progress in reducing the overall threat of nuclear war has stalled – and in many ways, gone into reverse. This state of affairs poses a clear and urgent threat to civilisation, and citizens around the world should demand that their leaders quickly address and lessen the danger.”

Now for the good news!

Last month 122 countries agreed at the United Nations on international legislation to ban nuclear weapons. New Zealand played a leading role in the negotiations and advocacy for the treaty. While no current nuclear power has agreed to the ban yet, this is the beginning of the moral journey to rid our planet of this scourge.

The ban includes the manufacture, possession and use of nuclear weapons and provides a pathway for their eventual elimination.

As Peter Prove International Affairs Director for the World Council of Churches says, the process leading to this treaty has “taken the international debate beyond the narrow, self-serving perspectives of military strategy and political influence to the wider domain of humanitarian principle and fundamental ethics, where the moral imperative against nuclear weapons is clear and categorical.”³

This is a sign of hope in midst of very dangerous times.

¹ https://www.cws.org.nz/sites/default/files/PeaceSunday2017_0.pdf

² <http://thebulletin.org/sites/default/files/Final%202017%20Clock%20Statement.pdf>

³ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/banning-nuclear-weapons-122-governments-take-leadership-where-nuclear-powers-have-failed>

Dangerous Times

Dangerous times are the context for the readings we have heard today. The bible passages are written out of clear situations of great peril, a deep sense of immediate threat and conflict, fear for life and limb.

So how do the people in those passages respond?

Psalm 17 is the prayer of all those innocent people caught up in conflict:

- Trapped as hostages to militants in Marawi city in the Philippines
- Under siege in Syria
- Fenced in in Gaza
- Or bombed, displaced and starving in Yemen

It is the prayer of the victims of atrocity and hatred, for the victims across the Pacific, where most of the whole history of the nuclear horror has actually played out - the Marshall Islands, Mururoa Atoll and French Polynesia, the Australian outback....and the bombs on Japan.

Imagine the writer of this psalm is huddling fearfully in her home with her children as the conflict rages about them. The situation seems so hopeless, so brutal and visceral in its danger. Those with the bombs and weapons feel so full of power and to have all they need to “fill their bellies’.

How can she respond to this? She places her trust in “beholding God’s face in righteousness”, that God’s love is still with her even if the world seems against her. Her plea to God is a plea to us – the hands and feet of God in this age.

Persecution and miracles...

The Gospel reading from Matthew might seem an odd one to share on Hiroshima Day.

But the story begins with Jesus “withdrawing to the desert”.

The prophet John the Baptist, a relative of Jesus and an outspoken critic of the government of Israel, demanding repentance and a new way for the people of Israel, has just been executed by personal order of the King Herod himself – without a trial.

A grotesque act of political oppression that directly threatens Jesus in his new prophetic ministry teaching about the Kingdom of God, the in-breaking of the new rule of God’s love and peace on earth.

Jesus must have been frightened, feeling threatened and uncertain about how to respond. Did he seek safety and distance from the reach of the King? Did he need a place to process his grief and fear, to collect his thoughts? We don’t know but no doubt something of all of this was going on.

But as sometimes happens when you have set a social and political movement into action – you can’t get away that easily. The people followed him into the wilderness. They too were fearful and uncertain and looking for leadership. Maybe they wanted to show their support for their new leader?

Jesus found himself unable to escape the mantle of leadership, filled with compassion for their situation, he did the most practical thing imaginable – he organised to feed them. Out of this compassionate action a miracle occurred – everyone was able to have enough to eat.

Today is a communion Sunday for our faith community and the story of the feeding of the 5,000 is linked and woven into the complex web of understandings and interpretations of the meaning of holy communion, the Lord's Supper, Around the world millions of our sisters and brothers in Christ join in this remembrance of Jesus' life, ministry and in doing so make real Jesus on-going spiritual presence among us.

I believe that the Word we are hearing today is telling us something very hopeful – hope-filled.

To abolish nuclear weapons, we will have to “strip away their handsome mask”⁴. The golden age of deterrence is at its end, the Cold War logic of mutually assured destruction is bankrupt and it is time to consign them to the same category of vile and immoral tools of war as we have done with the international conventions banning biological and chemical weapons.

The effectiveness of these international bans is the blueprint and source of hope.

In the face of the dominant narratives in the media of North Korea’s nuclear missile testing and US threats to respond militarily, or the trend to Russia and US posturing in the style of the Cold War, we must join with others around the world to raise our voices for another path.

Testimonies of peace

The Hiroshima bombing was part of a horrific turn in the logic of war, where targeting civilian populations became seen as a legitimate tactic of war⁵.

Instead of trying to minimise civilian casualties, the goal became to create maximum fear and demoralisation.

This tactic is now of course being followed by the ‘terror’ organisations such as ISIS or Al Qaeda – they are simply following the logic of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - but they haven’t got nuclear weapons – yet.

The Spirit seemed to whisper pretty clearly to me in preparing this reflection.

The words of the poet Adrienne Rich (from the poem “Natural Resources”, in *The Dream of a Common Language*, 1993) leapt into my mind when I began to reflect on the readings and the full magnitude of the nuclear horror that still looms over us.

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed*

*I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,*

*with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.*

There is an important gender narrative to the whole nuclear weapons crisis.

Nuclear weapons are male violence extrapolated to the global level, writes Rebecca Johnson⁶. During the 1980s, she was among the Greenham Common women at the forefront of the anti-

⁴ Mustafa Kibaroglu <http://thebulletin.org/can-treaty-banning-nuclear-weapons-speed-their-abolition/abolish-nuclear-weapons-strip-away-their-handsome-mask>

⁵ <http://oldarchive.godspy.com/reviews/Killing-Women-and-Children-First-Hiroshima-and-Nagasaki-by-John-Zmirak.cfm.html>

nuclear movement in Britain. They started by opposing cruise missiles, but ended up challenging masculine ideologies of defence, security and, indeed, political action.

Gender role stereotypes drive men into a circular logic of threat, response and shows of strength that feed a certain perception of masculinity and strength.

Women are perceived simply as those to be protected, treated as helpless victims, lacking the power to resist the brute strength of the bomb.

That is where Adrienne Rich's eloquent words enter to disrupt this logic, to uncover the "ordinary power" of those women who literally reconstitute, re-create, re-build each generation.

So, I want to honour all of those, women (and men as well), who 'with no extraordinary power' are re-constituting our world through the nuclear weapons ban work.

I am thinking of people like:

Dell Higbie, the NZ UN diplomat who has so patiently and persistently represents NZ in the endless rounds of talking and negotiating that has led to this ban.

Edwina Hughes, tireless coordinator for Peace Movement Aotearoa, who keeps us informed about the complexities of the work for peace and justice and involved in the active work for peace.

This year marks 30 years since NZ passed into law declaring NZ a Nuclear Free Zone⁷. St Andrews was one of the places that began this move by declaring itself a nuclear-free zone back in 1984, 33 years ago almost to the day.

I know some of you here today were part of those protest movements that have helped bring about dramatic change in our country and the world.

I am sure some of you here joined with Rev George Armstrong and the many others of the peace squadrons that paddled their kayaks and dinghies out onto the harbours of our country to confront the US warships visiting us with their nuclear weapons cargoes and nuclear propulsion.

As we seek to move forward in the work for peace we look to the activities and example of those of you who are veterans of past campaigns and current leaders and activists.

So, in the spirit of celebrating the stories of hope that you here today embody, we will be asking you to write down and share your stories of hope and peace so that we can share these and display them at the back of the church.

Peace be with us all.... Amen

⁶ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/rebecca-johnson/no-more-little-boy-and-fat-man>

⁷ <http://www.nuclearfreenz30.org.nz/>