

Where Shall We Stand? A Reflection on the Iraq War

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Where shall we stand, after three years, to reflect together on the Iraq War? As Christians the question invites us to make a deliberate choice.

Perhaps in a house like this, or at least in a heart like mine, there is a tendency—an attraction almost—to stand and reflect on the Iraq War from the shadows...from the long shadows cast by the profile of the powerful where there is fear-mongering as the prelude to war, falsehoods as pretext, vengeance as rationale, retaliation as strategy, and impunity as if by habit.

In that dark and sombre shadow, we become convinced of the righteousness of our own indignation and have good reason to criticise: the unilateral and pre-emptive use of force; the premises of the so-called 'global war on terror'; the very authors of these policies themselves; even, that what we object to is a new 'empire'; certainly priorities, and levels of spending on warfare, that mock global human needs.

But to stand in the shadow too long, to stay there, to become stuck there can make us shrill or as if we are without a witness for the hope that is within us.

However dark and depressing the shadow of empire, however firm the mentality we adopt to cope with it, there are other places to stand...healthier places from which to reflect and act.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminded the recent World Council of Churches Assembly in Brazil of this when he said that we are to love our neighbours and, yes, to love even our enemies, and then he continued: "And remember—your enemies are not God's enemies." Then he paused and said, "Bush," and paused again and said, "...bin Laden."

To hear those six words, "Your enemies are not God's enemies", and hear them delivered with a twinkle in the eye, is to be invited graciously from the shadow into the light. Called from the shadow where we are tempted like Bush and bin Laden to believe that our enemies very probably are God's enemies. Invited into the light where such judgement is for God and where God has much other work for us to do.

Three years ago, in April 2003, I was in Baghdad on assignment for Action by Churches Together. Although the genuine shock and awe of the war was all around, the shadow of Saddam Hussein was gone and the shadow of the new rulers had not really settled yet over the land. I'd like to offer what I saw there as a compass pointing to where we must stand today, to call us forth from the shadows of war into something much different: the clear light of God's compassionate love.

There was such light in the courtyard of St. Elias Chaldean Church in Baghdad where hundreds of people had taken shelter during the nights that Baghdad fell, where Christian and Muslim community guards protected the church and the mosque next door from looters, and where there was a pharmacy supported by ACT member agencies. The pharmacy supplied medicines to impoverished Shi'ite mothers whose babies had thin arms and limp hair and could not hold up their heads. From that courtyard came medical care that shined light on the results of Saddam Hussein's regime and on the consequences of a decade of sanctions against Iraq, showing that the country with the second largest petroleum reserves in the world had health statistics on a par with those of Mauritania. From the courtyard, neighbourhood clinics were being opened in Sadr City in communities that had up to that time been denied all rights by the previous regime.

There was the sunshine of divine compassion at Al Rashad Psychiatric Hospital also. The walls around its extensive grounds had been breached by US tanks crashing in at one end of the property and crashing out again at the other end. Through the gaps came looters and the hospital's 1,000 psychiatric patients had fled in fear. When I was there we found one psychiatrist on duty and reports coming in of patients wandering free on the far side of Baghdad, 30 kilometres away. But that day one man had come back, a frightened-looking man, a tailor, who had returned of his own will to the hospital to be in the healing hands of the psychiatrist who would not flee.

There was sunshine too, next door, at a Home for the Elderly. Aid packets were delivered the day I was there, lifting a little the siege of Baghdad in that one place. Those who were able, including staff, lined up and received the packets. But the crippled, the infirm and the sick were too slow—something like at the Pool of Siloam in the Bible—including one old man who moved by scuttling slowly across the ground and whose his clothes would come loose, threatening to fall off him, every time he did so. When the aid distribution was over there were packets and people scattered here and there about the yard, including a parcel on the ground beside the old man which if he tried to carry he would not be able to move. Then along came a woman we would all wish could be our aunt—someone who worked at the home, a Shi'ite woman all in black. She swept through the yard collecting up people and uniting them with their parcels. She restored the old man, his parcel, and his clothing to a place of dignity on one of the nearby porches.

It's hard to imagine where all those people are now after three years of violence and chaos, of strike and counter-strike, of indiscriminate killing. The shadow cast by the violence blots out our knowledge of their daily life. But such people are still there and present in great numbers—perhaps one Iraqi in three, judging from available figures about levels of deprivation in the population.

To take our place beside those who are not counted is to step into light of God's love. Standing with them under God's mercy is surely the place from which to reflect on this third anniversary of war.

Our text today, Psalm 85, says, "Justice looks down from the sky". Where will it find us in a place like Iraq? It must find us—in our prayers, in our speech, in our analysis, in the policies of the church and in church programs—not on one warring side or another, but firmly on the side of the suffering.

Connected in this way to the weak we lose the narrowing blindness that comes when we stay in the shadows of the mighty. Instead we see the broad sweep of God's steadfast love, so finely expressed in Psalm 85. Then we are on firm ground to mark this anniversary:

- to speak out for all those who suffer the violence in Iraq or to help them in other ways;
- to strive as Christians to heal divisions with Muslims in that region and wherever we live;
- to support the Christians of the Middle East in their unique calling to shape positive change in the region;
- to engage other Christians in dialogue for understanding and action for peace to end this war;
- to pray for the leaders whose war it is; and
- to pray and work in international affairs for the rule of international law.

Most of all, in a mere three years, we do not lose hope. We do well to remember Mesopotamia as the cradle of our civilisation, as the place where the exercise of unilateral retribution in daily affairs first had to cede to the collective will under law in Hammurabi's Code, as the land of Abraham all of whose children—Jewish, Christian and Muslim—are called to the work of peace, as the land where Wise Men noticed Christ's birth from a far and came to worship the Prince of Peace, and as the region where in our conflicted age the World Council of Churches and many of its member churches did their utmost to convince Muslim opinion leaders that this was not, is not and could not be a 'Christian' war. Thanks be to God.

The shadow of every empire and of each Nebuchadnezzar may loom large for awhile but these will soon pass. Training our eyes on the light instead of the shadow we see Jesus beckoning us to join him in healing the sick, freeing the prisoners, telling Good News to the poor.

God's justice gives no ground away to the shadows. It marches in front of us, as Psalm 85 says, opening a path for us to follow. We go with glad hearts and clear heads because God is plenteous in mercy and abounding in steadfast love.

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