

## Sermon – 09/04/2006 am

### War and War Crimes

Study Text: Deuteronomy 20

Heads of nations in Europe, the Middle East and Africa have recently been brought before international courts on charges of committing war crimes. They have been charged with torture, mutilation, rape and summary execution of prisoners. War itself is horrible but such things are even more horrible. There have always been wars and sadly there always will be, but they are no excuse for the total abandonment of human dignity and respect for life.

God gave his people rules for war. Some people overlook this and are critical of the way God led Israel into war. They think the Old Testament is full of wars. They are particularly critical of what is called Holy War. Holy War had specific rules of engagement which we have seen before, and which are touched on again in this chapter. But the focus of this chapter is upon a different type of war, with different rules of engagement.

### Eclipsed by God

*The Lord your God is he who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies and save you (20:4).* The people of God were few in number. In most battles they would be vastly outnumbered (11:23). Moreover they were not well equipped. Other nations had horses and chariots. It was not until the time of Solomon that Israel had such equipment. In fact it was not until that time that they had a standing army. The people Moses was addressing were not trained soldiers. They had been slaves and were about to become peasants, men living off the land.

But the Lord promised to go with them into battle, to be with them every step of the way. This was no empty promise. Had not the Lord done this before? Had he not destroyed the army of Egyptians at the Red Sea? Had he not recently given them victory over the Amorite kings Sihon, and Og? (2:33; 3:3). The Lord promised to continue delivering his people in battle, as long as they trusted him and obeyed his word.

It was the duty of the priest to remind Israel of this promise as they assembled for battle. *Do not let your heart be faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them (20:3).* At the battle of Jericho the priests, carrying the 'ark of the covenant' and blowing their trumpets, led the army. What would people think today if they saw the bishop or moderator addressing our army in this way, and leading them into battle! But that is how it used to be.

*The sword of the Lord and of Gideon* cried the 300 men Gideon led out against the vast Midianite army (Judges 7:18). They knew they were vastly outnumbered, but they also knew that the Lord was with them. The Lord put fear into the hearts of the enemy so that they panicked and fled. *Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit says the Lord (Zechariah 4:6).*

You may not be facing any vast army or visible enemy at present but it maybe that you are facing the enemy of your soul. You may be engaged in a spiritual battle, with your enemy the devil roaring about like a lion seeking whom he may devour (I Peter 5:8). You may be going

through a testing time and beginning to fear. If so then remember the Lord's promise to be with you and to deliver you. He will deliver you from every attack upon your flesh or your soul. Trust the Lord and do not fear. Take up the armour of God and stand firm.

There is a song that goes:

*In the name of Jesus, in the name of Jesus we have the victory  
In the name of Jesus, in the name of Jesus, Satan will have to flee,  
When we stand in the name of Jesus tell me who can stand before  
In the mighty name of Jesus, we have the victory.*

## **Exemption Rules**

Without a standing army all able bodied men in Israel were called upon to join in any war they had to fight. Officers, who may well have been tribal leaders, were appointed to lead the troops along with the priests. Nothing is told of training for battle but we are told of exemptions from battle. Two classes of men were given exemptions.

Firstly, there were those who had not yet seen the fruit of some major personal project. Such men were exempted so that they could reap the rewards of their labours, generally associated with establishing a family, home or business. A man who was engaged was allowed to stay behind and get married, *lest he die in battle and another man marry the girl* (20:7). Later Moses said that a newly married man was exempted from military service for a period of one year (24:5).

A man who had just built a house was allowed to stay back and dedicate his house and probably settle his family in it. Similarly a man who had just planted a vineyard was allowed to stay until he had eaten of its fruit. This may have taken 3-4 years. The Lord showed compassion towards such men and indeed a sense of justice – least another man get what he had worked for. Moreover, the man who worked to build and plant would have given thanks and praise to the Lord at the time of completion. The Lord would be glorified by such men and their families.

Secondly anyone who was fearful and afraid was exempted from military service. Why this leniency? 'Why should cowards be let off so easily?' you might say. When Gideon went out to battle, two thirds of his army turned back when offered this exemption. But two things must be kept in mind. The battle was the Lord's. The Lord told Gideon he had too many men.

And furthermore, no army wants men who are there just to make up the numbers. They want men who will fight without fear. Fearful men would cause others to fear and the morale of the whole army could suffer (20:8). Any leader would prefer a few fearless and dedicated men to a lot of fearful, half hearted men who might desert in the midst of battle.

It is the same in the Lord's army today, in the battle to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole world. Many loudly proclaim – 'I will go, I will serve the Lord in whatever ministry I can'. But when you turn around they are gone, nowhere to be found. They did not count the cost. They could not leave their good job, they could not leave their family, they could not leave this or that; sometimes even their pet cat! Stay at home dear friend if you cannot go all the way in the battle. Stay at home if that is your commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ – you just demoralise your leader and everyone else.

Jesus actually used the analogy of a king going off to war when he spoke about commitment. A king will sit down and count the cost before he goes to war. If he is not able to go all the way and win the battle then it is better not to start. The highway to heaven is littered with the ruined efforts of many half-hearted men and women who said to the Lord 'I will follow you wherever you go' but who turned back as soon as the going got tough.

## Engagement Rules

In contrast to Holy War against the inhabitants of Canaan, opponents in far away cities were to be offered peace. If they accepted this offer they were to be *placed under a tribute to you and serve you* (20:11). A vassal treaty was declared between them and Israel. If they did not surrender then the men were to be killed but the women and children taken alive along with the plunder (20:14).

The special case of a female captive being taken as a wife is dealt with in the next chapter (21:10-14). Though a captive she was to be treated with human dignity. She was allowed to *mourn her father and mother for a full month* before the man could take her as his wife. There was no provision for wholesale rape as occurred in other nations and as we often hear about today. And even if the husband later disliked her he was not to treat her brutally or sell her as a slave.

Moses even ruled against destruction of the environment during war through the indiscriminate felling of trees (20:19, 20). He told the men that when building siege works against a city they were not to cut down fruit trees or other trees used for food. This is quite amazing. It is not a policy which affirms the modern environmental movement as some want to make out. But it does reveal God's concern for all his creation, particularly as mankind depends upon it for his wellbeing.

War is not an excuse for wholesale destruction of the environment, even if this is often the case. In Europe fields and forests were destroyed by warfare. In Vietnam vast forest areas were destroyed by herbicide in an effort to locate the enemy. In Africa forests and wildlife are destroyed during wars.

Moses commanded restraint in war. He commanded respect for captives as fellow human beings. He commanded respect for the environment on which men depend for food and their livelihood. His people were to remember the Lord their God in battle, for it was he who gave the victory.

May the Lord in his mercy keep us as a people and a nation from war. But if we are again so engaged, let us remember these commands of the Lord given through his servant Moses to his people.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*