

On Problems of Trying to be Perfect
Sunday 10.11.19 at Carrs Lane Church Centre

I don't know whether you've seen the film *Official Secrets*. It's the cinematic version of the story of Katharine Gun, who worked at GCHQ in the early 2000s during the time of the decision-making process about whether we as a country would go to war with Iraq. She leaked an important e-mail to do with attempts – some dodgy dealings, in fact – made behind the scenes to construct a case for war. There are one or two places in the film where the expression 'war is not inevitable' gets used. I won't spoil any of the detail for you about who uses the expression and why, and would commend the film to you. When my wife and I watched it, though, despite the seriousness of the film, we both smiled in the cinema. That's because within our own family we recall a telling moment over a family meal some years ago – when our children were in their early teens – and my wife had a spirited and passionate disagreement with my father about the inevitability, or not, of war. Our children – to this day – whenever my wife gets passionate about any topic, whatever it happens to be, screech in high voices 'war is not inevitable' as a reminder of that very heated debate.

If it's now a fond family memory – my father died 6 years ago – it's because the passions were real, the positions firmly held, there was ruthless honesty being displayed...and each – both my Dad and my wife, were holding their own on Christian grounds. My Dad had done National Service in Egypt in the 1950s, and though he'd have loved to study engineering, such an option wasn't available to most working-class Merseyside boys in the 50s. His National Service experience was his equivalent to many of my generation's experience of University and shaped him deeply. He was shaped, too, by Calvinist evangelicalism and thus tended towards acknowledging the frailty of humankind and the persistent tendency towards sinfulness. By contrast, my wife – an optimistic Methodist, conscious of how human beings are called to work together with God in welcoming the Kingdom of God into this world – was always keen to emphasize what was possible, positively, eager to resist my Dad's quietist, even fatalistic tendencies. Two Christians with differing, even contradictory, convictions about war, equally passionate, deeply respectful of each other, but fundamentally in disagreement. Our children, of course, loved and squirmed at the exchange...which is why it's such a prominent story in our collective family narrative.

Is war inevitable? It would be good to think that's not the case, but we are all confronted with the harsh facts of war – and on this day, and tomorrow, especially we bring those facts to mind, as we remember the people who died due to war, and who still suffer because of what war has done to them. It's not only the religious in our society, of course, who do the remembering. The quip that there are few atheists in the trenches is often quoted. I don't know how true it is. But even if it is true, there may be many who move to atheism as a result of war, simply because people can't grasp how – if God is – why God would not stop all the bloodshed. It's an understandable response, though it doesn't allow for recognition of the extent of human freedom. If God is a God of love, then God does not coerce. If love entails letting others be, then it involves risk. The risk of God in creation is reflected in any loving act which lets another be, in freedom. War is but the consequence of freedom. Whenever we are at war we feel compelled to act, and we see a need to restrict the freedom of another which we believe to have got out of hand. Love is compromised and put on hold, in a way. It is not surprising when people conclude that war cannot possibly be of God. It could, though, be inevitable as the price of freedom. And if it

is, then we can hold God jointly responsible. Odd though it may seem, that does seem to be what we have to conclude.

One thing's for sure, war highlights in stark ways the fact that as human beings we wrestle not just with our freedom, but also with our imperfections. There's much, of course, in Christian tradition about human frailty. The Apostle Paul is something of an expert on it, not only of human shortcomings but also on accounts of how and why we **are** so frail, and even so evil. So insistent is he on the way in which we can be overcome and taken over by evil that it almost sounds as if we're let off the hook at times. We are not strong enough, in our freedom, to resist the powers that would take over us. Not for the Apostle Paul, it seems, is there much sense that we can be fully free, in practical terms, in this life, even though Christ has set us free in anticipation. There's usually that sense in Paul that real freedom will come later. Don't expect Paul to speak much of perfection in the here and now.

Matthew the Evangelist, though, speaks differently. He wants us to seek to be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect. He ascribes these words to Jesus, even though Luke the Evangelist suggests that Jesus said 'be merciful as you father is merciful'. Perhaps Jesus said both, at different times. Luke, though, presents us with the more realistic, and Matthew with the more demanding Jesus – as befits the Evangelist who is the most moralistic, and one most keen to teach us directly who to be and what to do. Somehow, even without the words of Paul echoing in our ears, we know that perfection is beyond us. We understand, though, what Matthew is trying to do here. In the same way that sports stars and would-be celebrities say you need to aim high, so Matthew is reminding us of how high the bar is. God alone is perfect, but God is the one in whom we are encouraged to live, move and have our own being. So it's quite logical to say: 'be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect', and to suppose that that's what Jesus demanded of his followers. But it's a tough demand.

A few years back I was in a local branch in Leicester of a main chain of restaurants. All the waiting staff had T-shirts on with a slogan on the back. The slogan read: 'Training for Perfection'. It made me wince, and made me sad. I don't know about you but my own experience of the world of work is such that though, again, it's understandable what's being communicated here – 'we as a restaurant chain want to be the best and to serve you well as you enjoy your steak and chips'. But I also know that in the wrong hands, such training initiatives become unbearable for some staff – either managers or managed – when the pressure and anxiety fails to respect the realism of what it means to be human. [On all this, see the new Ken Loach film, *Sorry We Missed You*.] Training for perfection is, in one clear sense, simply misguided...even foolish. At least Matthew the Evangelist, even if he's demanding too, knows that we can only speak of perfection in light of God's perfection. Don't, in other words, think of human perfection in any other way. It simply won't come.

Christian faith is in so many ways simply a way of living, with and for God, as we know God in Jesus Christ, assisted by God's Spirit, who helps us live with imperfections. It says: accept who you are, what you are actually like, and present yourself regularly, warts and all, ruthlessly honestly before God... and do that in the company of others. That will be your church. If you can do that, then you will be better able to live with your imperfections. Too many areas of life in the present are making few allowances for imperfections. Or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, it's implied that imperfections don't matter at all – because everyone's got them we can be indifferent. Our faith will accept neither. The

quest for perfection will destroy us if we fail to acknowledge imperfections. Indifference to failings will destroy us because of our recognition of what imperfections will lead to.

Suddenly we're back where we began, around our own family dinner-table, debating whether or not war is inevitable, or watching *Official Secrets* and hearing the same discussion. God will accompany us in the handling of our imperfections. It is made plain in Christ how deeply God is enmeshed in the world, facing up with us and for us to consequences of our freedom. Whether or not war is inevitable, on this day, of all days, we confront our failings and the sometimes awful ways in which we use and abuse the freedom we have. Can we, will we, cope with the enormity of what we do? In worship, in prayer, and yet *always, always* in hope we can say: with God's help we will.

And to the God of compassion and grace, who in Christ revealed the cost of being involved in the world, and being tangled up with the freedom granted to creation, be all praise, now and always.

AMEN