

### 3 Before Advent

‘The first duty of government is national security’. This, or something like it, is a view you have probably heard touted on news or current affairs programmes. Sometimes it is referred to as the ‘Bush doctrine’, since it provided the starting-point for President George Bush’s approach to what he called the ‘war on terror’. But it is also the doctrine of our own present government: the Introduction to the coalition agreement states that ‘We are agreed that the first duty of government is to safeguard our national security and support our troops in Afghanistan and elsewhere – and we will fulfil that duty.’

But where did this doctrine come from—and is it true? Just saying that something is so, doesn’t make it so, and the fact that the people saying it are our political leaders doesn’t of itself make it more or less likely to be true. Stated in the way that they state it makes it sound like the kind of self-evident and universally accepted principle that we find in the first article of the United Nation’s declaration of human rights that ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’. But, of course, it is nothing of the sort. It is, I suggest, a relatively recent, political doctrine and, like many modern political, economic, and social doctrines, it is a secularized form of what was originally a theological doctrine. And, like many secularized theological doctrines, it is a secularized version of a bad theological doctrine. More specifically, it is a secularized version of a way of understanding the role of government associated with the Protestant Reformation that found its way into the mind-set of the English-speaking world through the agency of the Book of Common Prayer. And, like all kinds of bad theology, it is a doctrine that is actively harmful to human beings’ common efforts to further the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth, as in heaven.

That I am thinking about these things today is not because the news of the last couple of weeks has daily confronted us with the question of the Church’s relation to the use of force, and I shall certainly not address any of the specifics of the sad situation at St Paul’s Cathedral. Rather, I am thinking about them because our readings and collect clearly direct us to reflect on the attitude Christians are to take to government. Let us, then, briefly remind ourselves of what we have just heard in them. Unfortunately, the nature of the topic may offer less in the way of personal encouragement and comfort than a sermon should and may end up sounding more like a lecture, but such is the matter before us.

Our first reading from Deuteronomy sets out a programme for limiting the powers of Kings in ancient Israel, warning that they must submit to the moral and religious teaching set out in the written law, remaining faithful to their obligations to God and people and not giving themselves over to personal aggrandisement. In our second reading St Paul urges that the Christian communities should supplicate, pray, intercede and give thanks for everyone but, especially, 'for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity'. This priority seems to mesh in with what Paul also teaches elsewhere that 'there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God', to which he adds the warning that 'therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed' and further notes that although rulers are no terror to those who act well, they are a terror to the bad.

Now these readings could be seen as pointing to two very different views of the relationship between what we now call Church and State. Deuteronomy suggests what is called the theocratic view, according to which the civil power is subordinate to the ecclesiastical power. Paul, on the other hand, could be seen as anticipating the Reformation view known as Erastianism, in which the earthly sovereign is said also to have sovereignty over all outward manifestations of religion, leaving only the inner sphere of conscience to the 'spiritual' arm. All that the Church is to do in relation to the state is to encourage obedience to the laws of the land and to pray for the sovereign power. This view reflects the Lutheran teaching known as the 'two kingdoms' doctrine. This taught that God exercised his sovereignty over history in two distinct ways, using the power of earthly monarchs to limit and constrain the excesses of human sinfulness, whilst simultaneously using the power of the gospel to transform hearts and minds in the direction of earnestly and longingly desiring the coming of the Kingdom of God. What chiefly distinguishes these two ways is, of course, that the earthly monarch both may and must use force to compel the sinner to submit to the laws of society or to compel competing rulers to remain within the limits of their proper sovereignty. In other words, the tools of earthly monarchy are law and war: the judiciary, the police, and the military. The spiritual arm, on the other hand, can do no more than to appeal to conscience. Obey—not because you must, but because it is right!

(Here, of course, we see the nub of the argument over whether the Church itself should ever instigate the use of force, as in the debate around the protesters outside St Paul's. According to the view I have been outlining, the Church can have no objection to the civil power using force in this way, if it is used according to law. But it itself may not be party to such a use.)

But whatever its relevance to unfolding events, this two kingdoms doctrine seems somewhat artificial. In fact, recent research has suggested that it is not at all the view of Martin Luther himself, usually seen as its instigator. Luther was, as is well-known, a careful reader of St Paul, and he undoubtedly affirmed Paul's view that the earthly ruler might legitimately be a terror to all bad citizens. In fact, as students of Reformation history know, Luther could write rather blood-curdling exhortations to the German princes to suppress by all available means the peasant uprisings that were at least in part sparked off by Luther's own teachings. Here is a flavour: 'Let everyone who can, smite; slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you.' Undoubtedly some Middle Eastern rulers have shared this view, but it is not a view that most Christians today would be comfortable with. As so often, Luther's readiness to follow a line of argument wherever it might lead, led him too far. Even so, this is not the whole of Luther's teaching, and whilst he did teach that the earthly sovereign had the right to use the sword at home or abroad in the cause of earthly justice, that is something very different again from saying that this is the first or primary duty of earthly monarchs or that earthly rule is primarily about using coercion to enforce the basic structures of social order.

In fact, whether with regard to the spiritual realm or the earthly realm, Luther's fundamental priority was that we are all, rulers and ruled, obliged by the gospel to govern our lives by the most basic of all commandments: love your neighbour as yourself. In the perspective opened up by this commandment, the first duty of earthly government is not national security, it is the provision of those basic goods that enable human beings to live fulfilled lives in this world: it is to care for the production and distribution of the fruits of the earth in their season, for attending to the housing, the welfare, the feeding of all members of society, old and young, rich and poor, the widow and the orphan and, as the Old Testament repeatedly makes clear, also for the stranger in the land. Agriculture, trade, housing, healthcare, welfare and education—the goods and services that enable human beings to be fully and truly human—are, and must be, the first care of all earthly government.

It is only as or to the extent that the provision of these goods and services are threatened, that the question of coercion and force arises—not the first duty of government, but something like the sixth, or seventh, or eighth! And that makes a difference. For example, we have in our time become used to the idea that a nation state requires the provision of a permanent military force in order to safeguard its existence and life. The terrible history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century undoubtedly reinforced that assumption, transforming it into what might be called a social meme, a default position that is virtually unchallengeable in public discourse. Yet it was not always thus. And, of course, the vast majority of those whose death in war we shall remember next week were not professionals: they were people like my parents, who hated the army and did not endorse military values but who also understood that the exceptional and terrible circumstances they faced in their young adult lives required that they enlist in the war against Nazism—although, again like many, many others, my father for one regarded it as an unresolved question whether, if called up to fight again in Korea, he would do so. Their view of life was not, my country right or wrong, but that war was and should only be a very exceptional response to a very exceptional evil. But if once we make 'national security' the first duty of government, that insight is lost—and a whole conception of nation and of government is lost with it.

Now obviously, the modern world is not the ancient or medieval world. The technological nature of modern society means that we cannot just call up the volunteers, as in 1914. But we must resist allowing ourselves to be duped into thinking that what may be a necessary evil is an integral part of how the world is. Not just one but two prophets, Isaiah and Micah, spoke of the time when swords would be turned into ploughshares, and if we cease to hope for that time, we have thrown in the sponge—and such a hope is all the more pressing in this age of globalization, when, as never before, it is really possible for all 7 billion of us to live as one human family in a common planetary home. This is not a distant dream: it is a possibility that can—I would say must—be a primary and urgent task of the coming century. Although we stand in solidarity, a solidarity of sin, with those who wield the sword, sharing their guilt in equal measure, we cannot allow ourselves to accept that, in the end, either the Kingdom of God or the primary tasks of earthly government are advanced by the sword. For, to go back to Luther—to go back to Jesus—we all stand under the commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves. This is the only starting-point for good theology and it is the only sensible starting-place for good secularized theology as well.