

Rotary Club of Colorado Springs  
World Peace and Understanding Talk

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In the Biblical prophetic book of Isaiah, the prophet imagines a future time when universal peace will appear at the end of time. Paraphrasing the prophet, he foresees a time when “The lion will lie down with the lamb.”

It is a vision that, if one is religious, one might take as something to be fulfilled literally at some future time. But even if one does not share that literal end-time hope, it articulates one of the deepest yearnings of the human heart for the end of conflict and strife.

Centuries later, the prophet Woody Allen replied (again paraphrasing), “The Lion may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.”

The tension between that vision of a future time of universal peace and harmony and the reality of conflict and war in our world, lies at the heart of what we commemorate in this event today.

For me personally, war and conflict has never been far from me. I grew up as the oldest son of a B-47 pilot in the Cold War. Dad’s mission was to drop nuclear bombs on the Soviet Union, and we lived near enough to the flight line that the sounds of jet bombers taking off was a regular part of life. Were they training today, or were they on their way to Armageddon? When the lights flashed by the altar in the chapel and the flight-suited aircrews went running out of the chapel, and by the end of the service, B-47s were roaring into the sky, where were they going? Training, or to war? Some of you will remember the slogan emblazoned over the security entrance gates of every Strategic Air Command base (the command that controlled all nuclear bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles). Over every gate was the motto: “Peace is Our Profession.” To many of you this will sound like utter nonsense. But it of course reflected a real strategic concept: That only the threat of mutually assured destruction with the Soviet Union prevented a real shooting war – a “peace” of a kind. And to my great surprise, honestly, it worked and I’m still here!

I was 12 when the Cuban Missile crisis occurred, and I remember walking home from school as the skies over Whiteman Air Force Base turned black with the smoke of minute interval takeoff rockets that launched the bombers, three abreast, to dispersed bases where it was hoped the Soviet missiles wouldn’t know where to find them. We didn’t hear from Dad for weeks and the Air Force assured us we civilians would be safely ensconced in a cave! Even a 12-year-old knew that was a crazy idea!. We put aluminum foil on the basement windows in the vain hope that would deflect the light and heat of a nuclear blast. In my middle school on Mountain Home Air Force Base, we studied and were examined on the stages of radiation sickness. We

periodically were drilled on getting home quickly with air raid sirens blaring and the threat that, if we were outside after a few minutes, the Air Police would pick us up and take us to the gym for practice decontamination from nuclear fallout.

We now know that full nuclear war was probably only prevented in that crisis because one Soviet submarine commander defied an order to launch a nuclear torpedo at a US Navy destroyer. Another close call, we now know, was prevented when one Soviet watch-stander disbelieved his early warning system that US missiles were inbound on the Soviet Union and declined to order a retaliatory nuclear strike.

Growing up in this environment, I used to tell my students truthfully, I never imagined we would avoid nuclear war or that I would live to my current ripe old age.

And I graduated from High School in 1969, in the middle of the Vietnam War. I benefitted from the probably unfair 2S deferment that kept me from the draft because I was in college, but my ping pong ball number was 26, so I would definitely be drafted upon graduation. But the war ended before my college years did.

Later in life, I taught at the US Army War College and the US Naval War College. There my students were senior officers of O-5 and O-6 rank and after the deployments of the past many years almost all combat veterans. It was common to look at the hideously burned face of a Marine or to sense the psychic scars of war in PTSD and moral injury they had experienced. I saw what war had done to men and women I deeply respected over nearly 20 years teaching at a War College. So, I'd be the last person to minimize the human cost of war.

I mention only these few points to illustrate why my whole life has had a backdrop of the presence of war as a possibility and a reality of my life and of all of our lives.

How should we think about that reality in light of Isaiah's end-time hope?

Ask a professor to speak, and you run the risk of what I'm about to do: Illustrating the present by thinking about events and thinkers of many centuries past.

For me, the most important thinker is Augustine of Hippo (a.k.a. "St. Augustine"). He lived in the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century. The world he had known was falling apart around him. The Western part of the Roman Empire was teetering and fell decisively to conquest during his lifetime in 410 CE.

What attitude should he take about all this? As a Christian, he was well aware that the Empire was built on a foundation of violence, oppression and conquest. But he also knew that, despite those foundations, it provided a *Pax Romana*, a "Roman Peace." That peace provided stability, safe and well-maintained roads and aqueducts. It suppressed pirates and maintained domestic order. He called this "tranquility of order," and he saw that losing it would come a terrible human cost.

He correctly foresaw that, whatever its flaws, the *Pax Romana* would be missed and that what would follow would indeed be a kind of dark ages.

To think this through, he wrote a very big book, called “The City of God.” I believe his reflections in this book are the most profound and helpful guide to our thinking through our dilemma, even today.

He is speaking as a Christian theologian, of course. But I believe his insights are equally relevant to those who, like me, don’t share that comprehensive religious vision, but feel the tug of the ideal of universal peace deeply in other ways. But forgive me if I share his insights within his own framework, and then return to how else we might find it helpful for those of us who don’t accept the whole Christian frame.

Like most Christians, Augustine accepted the Biblical prophecies of a future age of peace and the return of Christ as literal truths. But they were truths for a future time, and did not explain the world we live in now. That coming age he called “The City of God.” But it is obvious that, while Christians might in some sense be citizens of that City here and now, and it might be their true and eventual home at the end of time, they are not fully its citizens here and now. They live in hope of the coming of the City of God, but here and now are also residents of The Earthly City.

A simple glance around would show that the perfection of that order is not true of government, and not true of the Church for that matter. Both are full of corruption, oppression and injustice. Attempting to live as if that City of God was our true residence now would result in naivete, at least, and exploitation and destruction at worst. As he put it to a Roman General officer in a letter, “We ought not before the appointed time to live with those alone who are holy and righteous.”

There is a hysterical scene in Monty Python’s movie spoof of life of Jesus movies, “The Life of Brian.” John Cleese is trying to whip up his band of Jewish revolutionaries, asking “What have the Romans ever done for us?” Members of the band begin pointing out things, and he concluded with “Well, apart from medicine, irrigation, health, roads, cheese and education, baths and the Circus Maximus, What have the Romans ever done for us?” The last member chimes in, “Brought peace”

For the time being, we live in The Earthly City. And in that City, the closest approximations to Peace and Order are sustained by and require force and the threat of force. This is a kind of “earthly peace.” It is far short of the cosmic transformation of Isaiah’s vision. But it is the best approximation possible in this world. As I said, he calls this “tranquility of order,” and only a hopeless idealist would object that, because it is not the complete fulfillment of perfect peace, it is not valuable and indeed key to human flourishing here and now. It is what stands between us and chaos and disorder. Are police and military power misused? Of course. But does that mean we don’t need them? To think or wish it so would be naivete. That is not to say, of course, that we shouldn’t continually work to make them as just and fair as possible. He gives the example of a judge. This conscientious judge, he says, will recognize that mistakes will be made. Innocent people will be convicted, and perhaps even executed. But, Augustine says, this judge will recognize the necessity of a judicial system and will strive to be as fair and honest as possible. Better a judge who is conscious of these tensions and issues and who strives to

overcome them. The prayer for the conscientious judge, he writes, is “From my sad necessities, deliver me.”

Similarly, for military personnel. In the letter to General Boniface, I mentioned earlier, Augustine writes, “Do not think that it is impossible for anyone to please God while engaged in active military service.” And again, “War is waged in order that peace may be obtained” – but of course only the peace of the earthly city, and not the peace of the City of God. Indeed, those fighting war waged to vanquish those disrupting the “tranquility of order” are the ‘Peacemakers’ as in “Blessed are the Peacemakers” of Matthew’s Gospel.

So, what is the relevance of this 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century thinker to our day?

Like Augustine’s Christian vision of a future time of universal peace and justice, we all feel the tug of that fervent hope in our hearts of hearts whether, like Augustine, we imagine it will literally come at some future time, or recognize it only as a deeply felt aspiration of the human spirit.

But for now, we live in the Earthly City. We recognize that what order and tranquility we have in the world are maintained by laws, judges, police and military force. It is not necessary to idealize them, or to cease to strive to make them better and fairer. It is not necessary to justify every war that comes along as wise, justified or necessary. But it would be dangerous idealism to try to live before its time, as Augustine put it, as if they were not necessary.

Augustine’s thought provides the basis for a long tradition of “just war” in the West – the idea that while military force may be necessary, it is bounded by ethical and eventually legal constraints. This tradition evolves through Medieval thought, the beginnings of International Law with Hugo Grotius, and eventually the Hague and Geneva conventions, the Charter of the United Nations, and the creation of the International Criminal Court. Discussing that tradition in any detail would be a whole other talk. But its long history reflects the desire to balance need for military force with the idea of constraint. I attempts to restrict the violence of war, to air only at military targets, to make every effort to spare non-combatants and civilian objects and structures, among many other requirements. These requirements are codified in military law and taught to well-trained militaries around the world.

For example, the current war in Ukraine. Russia has violated the central tenet of international law since 1928’s Kellogg-Briand Pact: that aggressive war is illegal. Russia has violated the central tenet of the UN Charter that member states will refrain from the use of force or the threat of force against other member states. Russia has also violated the laws of war egregiously in raping, pillaging, destroying schools and hospitals, electrical systems and other clearly civilian targets. And they are engaging in what is arguably genocide as defined and prohibited by the 1949 Genocide Convention.

What is the only available response? A revived NATO alliance and military aid to the Ukrainians appear to be the only realistic response. Expecting or asking the Russians to respect international law or negotiate reasonable terms is utterly unrealistic.

To take that view is it necessary to ignore Ukraine's history of corruption or to minimize their own war crimes? Clearly not. But if the relevant standard is not City of God peace, but tranquility of order in the international system, it is not hard to choose a moral side.

Augustine's contribution to clear thinking, in my mind, is balancing our most idealistic impulses with the realities of what earthly peace means given flawed human nature and flawed human institutions. Our highest ideals allow and require us to critique and criticize all the forces we mobilize to attempt to maintain a degree of tranquility of order. But a solid recognition of the reality of the City of Man prevents us from engaging in unrealistic and soft-headed idealism.

As Augustine wrote to General Boniface more than 1700 years ago, "Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity, and waged only that God may deliver us from the necessity and preserve them in peace."

Ever since WWI and the creation of the League of Nations, after every major clash, the international system has attempted to augment the choices of individual sovereign states with larger international bodies of "collective security" to, as the preamble of the UN charter puts it, "To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war which, twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind."

That system, for all its flaws, has prevented major interstate conflict since WWII. It is a system now being actively challenged by Russia, China, and in a different way by the Islamic world. Part of their objections are grounded in the reality that the UN system was, indeed, created by the US and Europe, and fits less comfortably into other cultural traditions. Nevertheless, the quest for a system of law and institutions that restrain war and acts of individual states seems to require hard work and international cooperation. It is probably the best we can hope for. It provides a route to a realistic albeit flawed and imperfect "tranquility of order" as the human community moves into its future. May we find the wisdom and political leadership to build and maintain workable structures for the Earthly City! This is not the peace of our deepest yearnings, to be sure. But it may be the best peace attainable in a world of aggressors, war criminals, and the ever looming threat of genocidal actors. It is a vision of peace that can guide realists as we strive to maintain tranquility of order in the Earthly City.