

TRIDENT VIEWED WITH THE EYES OF A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FAITH.

THE HEXHAM DEBATES SERIES

20 FEBRUARY 2010, ST MARY'S CHURCH, HEXHAM

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It's a great pleasure to be here in Hexham today. I'm delighted to be invited to make this short trip over the border, and I note that next month your speaker is Alistair McIntosh, also from Scotland. You're very brave to be inviting so many Scots here! I understand that Hexham has not always been very happy to see Scots! In 1292 William Wallace more or less razed Hexham to the ground. And in 1312 Robert the Bruce threatened a repeat performance unless you could come up with £2000! I understand that you managed to raise the money on that occasion, but I can assure you that today will not cost you anything at all! There's nothing to fear from Alistair or myself, and as I say, it's a delight to be here.

Alistair's theme will be climate change, and my theme is not unrelated to that. I've been asked to speak on the topic of Trident nuclear weapons, a theme very close to my heart, and to speak about this evil presence among us 'with the eyes of a 21st century faith'. Trident most certainly is an issue that we approach as a question of faith, as is care for the earth, and they are perhaps the most pressing themes we face today.

Late last year I was giving a great deal of thought to both issues, as I made my way to the United Nations in New York to head a delegation of Catholic development agencies. I was part of the SCIAF delegation, in the wider network of Caritas agencies, and in New York we met with the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, to present our case for urgent environmental action on behalf of some of the poorest people in the world.

Our meeting was timed to take place as world leaders gathered for the General Assembly of the UN, and I found I came away from New York frustrated at one level, but heartened at another. Frustrated, because it left me with reason to be worried on the matter of environmental protection. Sad to say, my misgivings have of course been borne out after the shameful failure of the summit in Copenhagen to reach any meaningful agreement for cutting global carbon emissions. I was heartened, though, because nuclear weapons became a central theme at the General Assembly, and I'm not sure that everyone expected it to be so prominent.

Issues don't come bigger than these, and the United Nations is a fitting place for both subjects to be considered, as they each have global consequences. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI has described the UN as 'an instrument of service to the whole human family', and we look forward to real and effective service emanating from there in the months ahead.

I was delighted to hear President Obama, as he chaired the UN Security Council pledging to rid the world of nuclear weapons. His proposal, could we say his dream, was given a ringing endorsement by the 14 other member states and was supported unanimously. Our own Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, present for the vote, of course gave his support to the motion. It was a motion which included a promise by nuclear weapons states "to undertake to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to nuclear arms reduction and disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament..."

So I have to say that it was therefore a major disappointment to then almost immediately hear the Prime Minister recommit himself to a massive programme to build and furnish a new generation of Trident nuclear weapons. How does it square up, that we can commit ourselves to an urgent agenda of nuclear disarmament in one breath, and to the commissioning and building of a new nuclear weapons system in the next breath?

We may hear the spin doctors tell us that it is a reduction, because we will have only three new Trident submarines instead of an originally planned four. The firepower of the submarines is what matters, and there is no plan to reduce this, so it's of little consequence that we will cut one submarine. There will still always be at least one of them on permanent patrol, ready to fire a nuclear weapon at a moment's notice.

And I cannot rejoice at the suggestion that the stockpile of warheads is likely to be reduced from 200 to 160, because that remains an awesome force for destruction. Besides, we have no indication of how many warheads each of the three submarines will carry, and this is the crucial issue. If each of the three submarines end up carry more nuclear warheads than our present Trident fleet carry, then the announcement of one less submarine amounts to nothing but a money saving decision. As at present, the warheads not out at sea will remain tucked away inside a beautiful Scottish hillside only 15 miles from Dumbarton where I spent my early boyhood years.

How will anything be different with the new Trident fleet? How will we live up to the promises so easily and so often made? That promise made as recently as September last year in New York, for example.

In case you need reminding, each of the current generation of Trident submarines carries 48 nuclear warheads. And please note well that each of those 48 warheads is at least 8 times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. Just contemplate that for a moment. One British Trident submarine can carry the equivalent of 384 Hiroshima bombs. A staggering reality.

What of the new generation? We know only few details yet, as it's all top secret. If they carry more than 48 warheads, then we will have increased, not reduced, our nuclear capability. Even if we retain 48 warheads it will hardly be in the spirit of the historic resolution that the Prime Minister Gordon Brown signed up to in New York.

I and many others have taken a great interest in Trident over many years now, and my archdiocesan Justice & Peace office recently produced a 'study guide' on nuclear weapons which was well received throughout Scotland and beyond. One of its major strengths is the section outlining recent teaching of the Catholic Church on nuclear weapons. Even a cursory glance at that section indicates to me the clear and consistent message of the Church over many years. Pope John XXIII said in 1963 that "justice, right reason and consideration for human dignity and life urgently demand ... that nuclear weapons should be banned". The Second Vatican Council underlined this in 1965: "Peace must be born of mutual trust between nations rather than imposed on them through fear of one another's weapons. Hence everyone must labour to put an end at last to the arms race, and to make a true beginning of disarmament".

I have never been a lone voice on this in the Church in Scotland. Our own Scottish bishops have spoken on nuclear weapons in two pastoral letters, the first in 1982, followed by another in Holy Week 2006. The conclusion of that Holy Week letter was simple and to the point: "we urge the Government of the United Kingdom not to invest in a replacement for the Trident system and to begin the process of decommissioning these weapons". Later the same year our brother bishops here, the Bishops Conference of England and Wales, underlined again the consistent nature of Church teaching and insisted on disarming our current system and scrapping plans for any new one. This is

what they have said: “The Church has always been clear in its teaching about the vital necessity for eventual total nuclear disarmament. Our judgement is that, by decommissioning its nuclear weapons, the UK now has a unique opportunity to offer the international community an approach to security and legitimate self-defence without the unconscionable threat of nuclear destruction. At the same time it could give a new impetus to the wider process towards total nuclear disarmament”.

I was delighted to read of my namesake, another Archbishop O’Brien, of Baltimore, Maryland, and his recent address at a deterrence symposium sponsored by the US Strategic Command. This is the body tasked with coordinating the USA’s nuclear weapon usage and response, a group at the very heart of nuclear weapon strategy in the biggest nuclear nation on earth. When we learn that before becoming archbishop of Baltimore O’Brien was the senior bishop of the US armed forces, what he has to say seems all the more remarkable. He concluded that “in Catholic teaching, the task is not to make the world safer through the threat of nuclear weapons, but rather to make the world safer from nuclear weapons through mutual and verifiable nuclear disarmament. This will require both bilateral and multilateral cooperation.”

I might add that it may also, on occasion, benefit from unilateral decisions on the part of any one nuclear weapons power, such as ourselves.

Given the recent events that I’ve referred to at the UN, isn’t there even greater reason for Britain to redouble its efforts to give a new impetus to the wider process towards disarmament? It would not be difficult, and indeed, it would be prophetic and courageous. To disarm now, unilaterally, and to scrap the plans for a new Trident system, would be truly great leadership. Indeed, it would lead the way towards that goal of wider disarmament that Prime Minister Gordon Brown voted for at the UN, and what can be so wrong about that?

We know that only 8 nations currently possess nuclear weapons. Two or three others appear to be making efforts to also be nuclear powers. But let’s be clear, this means that more than 180 nations believe they can be secure without possessing such weapons, without threatening instant genocide and destruction.

Of those 8 nuclear nations, two stand out as having a great deal to do to realise that dream of President Obama which I have mentioned. These are, of course, the USA and Russia. Most of the other countries in fact have little to do to realise the dream.

And of these others, none is better placed than we are to lead the way and take the great leap towards disarmament. Our current system is already near the end of its life. We are obligated under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to work towards complete disarmament. Please note, too, that Britain signed the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty as long ago as 1968. Surely it’s about time to show we have some genuine intention to honour what we have signed? We used to believe in Britain that giving our word, and adding our signature, really meant something. In this case, though, our word has been meaningless, at least until now. Now, however, we have a new obligation, that which comes from the Prime Minister’s endorsement of President Obama’s UN resolution. It’s a promise to work even harder and more speedily towards complete disarmament. Will this promise go the way of the Treaty promise, or will it actually mean something this time? Sad to say, the signs are not good that it will mean anything, and our government seem hell-bent on imposing a new generation of Trident.

Let me say something also of what is a basic and essential moral obligation, the obligation not to threaten with undue force. We call Trident the nuclear threat, but we must not threaten. That is a moral failure and a weakness. It’s what bullies do.

In addition to this, firing a nuclear weapon in anger or in retaliation would be a violation of all the rules of conduct in war. As we see so often in Afghanistan and Iraq at this present time, so many military deaths is tragic. More soldiers have been now killed in Afghanistan than in the Falklands, and we mourn the loss of each and every one of them.

In a nuclear attack, though, few of the dead would be military casualties. They would be civilian. And on a massive and unimaginable scale.

Somehow the killing of innocent civilians always seems yet more harrowing and distressing than even the death of soldiers, and innocent civilians are clearly the target of a nuclear weapon.

We cannot begin to imagine what even one of our nuclear warheads would achieve in terms of deaths and after effects in the nation that we attack. I bring you back to the fact I mentioned earlier, that each warhead has 8 times the power of the Hiroshima bomb, and each submarine carries 48 such warheads. This staggers the mind but never forget that it is the bottom line – this is what we are talking about when we talk about our nuclear weapons, about Britain's potential to kill and maim on horrific and hellish scale.

We have other obligations to comply with. One such obligation is well summed up in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, section 2309, concerning a so called 'Just War'. It says there that:

“The strict conditions for legitimate defence by military force requires rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy. At one and the same time: a) the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain; b) all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; c) there must be serious prospects of success; d) the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.”

Who could put their hand on their heart and say that any one of these four conditions could be met?. And even if one could, the Catechism clearly states that all four conditions should be met “at one and the same time”. It's impossible, and a nonsense to argue that they could.

I suppose I've said very little yet that is explicitly connected to our 21st century faith. Implicitly, though, I hope that everything I've said has to do with our 21st century faith. All of this is future looking, it's a hope for something that is not our present reality, in these early days of this new century.

For something explicit, maybe I should leave that to our 21st century pope, whom we all look forward to welcoming here in only a few months. Pope John Paul II was an undoubted champion of nuclear disarmament, and developed a position and teaching on nuclear weapons that has got us to this point now. Nevertheless, we could say that John Paul was only a John the Baptist to Pope Benedict XVI, who has been stringent and utterly untiring in his call for nuclear disarmament.

Pope Benedict XVI took advantage of his first message for the World Day for Peace, in January 2006, to point out the foolishness of a nuclear deterrence policy such as ours. Speaking about Britain and those other few countries that possess nuclear weapons he asked: “What can be said about those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries? ...this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims. The truth of peace requires that all... agree to change their course by clear and firm decisions, and strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament.”

Here is the great voice of our 21st century faith calling the British nuclear deterrence policy baneful, just plain wrong, based on a false premise of what security in fact means.

The Pope's message was underlined the following year, in his 2007 Peace Day message. On that occasion he said states should make "international accords for the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons," and states that those who now have such weapons should make "a determined commitment to seek their reduction and definitive dismantling."

He said this long before that historic meeting of the UN Security Council last year, but he could have been anticipating it.

Wouldn't it be something if the British Government announced such a decision in the week of the Papal visit?! It shouldn't seem absurd. This is our opportunity. Disarming now, reversing the decision to replace Trident with a new system, would show Britain to be truly great. It would put us in a position to speak with authority and legitimacy on the nuclear ambitions of North Korea, Iran, and other nations who strive to develop nuclear weapons. Possessing these weapons ourselves gives us no credibility when it comes to urging others to give up their ambitions to also possess them. Why would or should they listen?

Ultimately, to continue with a new generation of Trident, whether three submarines or four, 200 warheads or 160, is to admit failure and weakness. It would be failure at many levels, not least failure to comply with our obligations in morality and in international law. It would be to fail the people of Britain, and the people of the world, and the 14 other leaders present when Mr Brown voted to support that resolution of the Security Council. It would be weakness because weak people and weak nations do not trust their own resources, do not see their own natural strengths as adequate, and instead saddle themselves with the tools and trappings of power and might. But as people of faith we believe that only God should come with power and might, and any power and might that a single nation may possess is only momentary and passing, as we have seen through all of history. What frightens is that now, for the first time, the power and might of a nation can destroy the world. This too has to pass, and it is our efforts at disarmament that may help this passing.

Archbishop Rowan Williams said recently that "To plan a strategy around such weapons is to be defeated by them. To threaten such an outrage against humanity and its world is to begin to lose one's moral and human dignity. To work for a world free from nuclear arms is to work for the sake of that moral and human dignity."

At the moment, I suppose we are defeated by these weapons, but our Christian hope leads us on, to engage whole heartedly in this work that Archbishop Williams speaks of. Our season of Lent, just begun, is a wonderful time to reflect on this task.

One of my favourite scripture texts is from Matthew: "The people that lived in darkness has seen a great light; on those who dwell in the land and shadow of death a light has dawned."

It is my earnest hope, and I pray deeply, that the light of disarmament will dawn on our political leadership, those with responsibility for our nuclear policy. Perhaps our 21st century faith can lead to a 21st century disarming, one that is unilateral and prophetic.

I know that in this audience today we represent many different church traditions, and I would like to bring to your attention an online petition that I myself have recently 'signed up to'. It's an initiative of very many churches in the UK, and is entitled 'Now Is The time'. How true it is, that now is the time, and I encourage you to take some of your own time to search for the page – it has the easy name of 'endnuclearweapons.org.uk'.

Let me just quote what it is you would be signing up to:

“We the undersigned believe that the use or threat of use of weapons of mass destruction is immoral. We acknowledge the spread and increasing accessibility of nuclear technology and the threat that this poses to our security. We are encouraged by the prospect of significant reductions in US and Russian nuclear arsenals. We call on nuclear weapons states to refrain from updating their nuclear arsenals and remind them of their "unequivocal undertaking" to meet their obligations to eliminate all nuclear weapons under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). We owe it to our children and our grandchildren to seize the opportunity to put in place a new legally binding verifiable and universal agreement to eliminate all nuclear weapons. Now is the time.”

A most worthy sentiment, I hope you will agree.

So, let me end by leading you to your Hexham debate for next month, on ecology. I have mentioned the great leadership of Pope Benedict XVI, and his annual messages for world day for peace on January 1st. His message for this year was entitled “If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation” and was, as the title suggests, all about ecology. In it, he bridged the topics of ecology and nuclear weapons very well and very powerfully. He expressed his wish to “encourage the efforts of the international community to ensure progressive disarmament and a world free of nuclear weapons, whose presence alone threatens the life of the planet and the ongoing integral development of the present generation and of generations yet to come.”

It’s not enough to save the planet from nuclear destruction for the sake of the next generation. It has to be a planet that gives that generation the fullness of life. This is where Alastair McIntosh takes over on March 13th. Don’t miss him, and thank you for coming today.