

SERMON

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SERMON, &c.

LUKE XIV. 31, 32.

WHAT king going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace.

“ ALL scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”* Even those incidental allusions, which seem to be interposed by way of illustration only, are often replete with lessons of the first importance in the conduct of human life. Of this description are the words now recited. Our Lord was recommending to the multitudes that followed him, and appeared disposed to become his disciples, duly to consider the difficulties, before they took upon themselves the profession of his religion. These difficulties he states in the strongest terms ; and, by remitting them to the caution and prudence, commonly exemplified in secular affairs, he inculcates the most serious deliberation, with additional energy and force :....“ Which of you intending to build a tower sitteth not down first, and

* 2 Tim. iii. 16.

counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish. Or what king going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth, whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of you, that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.'

Such is the connexion, and such the primary design of the passage selected to guide our present meditations. While it is admirably adapted to the accomplishment of this primary design, it brings distinctly into view the very subject, to which our attention is now called by the chief magistrate of the nation: the subject of war; under the calamities of which we groan, and for the sins of which, it behoves us to humble ourselves before God. It impressively enjoins the duties, which arise from the situation in which we are placed, and may, therefore, enable us to see and correct the errors, into which we have fallen. In other terms, it suggests to our minds the inquiries proper to be made, and the measures, which the result of those inquiries dictates, respecting war.

These are the topics, on which I propose to insist in the following discourse.

I. Pursuant to this plan, we are, first, to consider the inquiries proper to be made, respecting war.

Degenerate, and wicked, and selfish, as the world is, causes of dissension can hardly fail to exist and operate,

as well between different communities, as between different individuals. “It must needs be that offences come.”* The collisions of interest are a fruitful source of discord. The schemes of ambition, the apprehensions of jealousy, the ranklings of revenge, the insinuations of intrigue, jointly and severally tend to stimulate aggression, and tempt deluded, infuriate mortals of one region, to infringe the rights, the territory, the possessions, and the lives of their brethren, who inhabit another. Nor is any country destitute of men, bankrupt in fortune, or character, or both, who exert their utmost diligence to give these temptations all the influence and effect, of which they are capable : men, whose only prospect of obtaining and preserving consequence, in society, grows out of disorder and confusion : men, who are insignificant and contemptible, in a state of tranquillity, repose, and virtue ; but in times of general ferment, rise, like the dregs of the boiling caldron, to the top, and hold a conspicuous rank, till that ferment subsides : men, who, devoid of moral and religious principle, address themselves to the worst passions of the human heart, and represent every appearance of indignity, every opportunity of aggrandizement, every chance of gain, as a sufficient incentive and reason for resorting to arms : men, who virtually say to those around them, “Come, and let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk for the innocent without cause : let us swallow them up alive as the grave, and whole, as those that go down to the pit : we shall find all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil : cast in your lot among us ; let us all have one purse.”†

* Matt. xviii. 7.

† Prov. i. 11—14.

But these, my brethren, are not the counsellors, nor is this the counsel, specified by "the Prince of peace." In exact accordance with the meekness, forbearance, and kindness displayed in his own practice, he gives no countenance to that imperious pride, which demands implicit homage ; to that malignant hatred, which pursues its objects with unrelenting cruelty ; nor to that insatiable avarice, which aims at the attainment of riches by "taking away the life of the owners thereof."* He puts the only conceivable case, in which the sword can be innocently drawn : not the case of those, who meditate the conquest, depopulation, and pillage of a neighbouring clime, and commence hostilities for the execution of that nefarious purpose ; but of those, against whom a formidable army is already marshalled : those, whose firesides and altars are threatened with immediate destruction : those, of course, who are necessitated to devise, ascertain, and adopt the best means of security and defence.

Hence it is evident, beyond dispute, that the first inquiry, proper to be made respecting war, relates to its justice. If found to be unjust, it is to be avoided, or relinquished, at every hazard. To engage in it, were to incur the imputation of murder ; to pray for its success, were to ask divine aid in the work of murder ; to give thanks for its victories, were to charge God with facilitating the perpetration of murder, in the most horrid forms, and to the most excessive degree.

I have no need to enter into the formal proof of what our Saviour clearly takes for granted ; that offensive war is unjust in its nature. The dictates of reason combine with the instructions of revelation to evince the

* Prov. i. 19.

fact. Can any possible ground of dispute between different governments authorize the scenes of devastation, crime, and misery, which war must inevitably create? Is it a point of honour? What tendency can there be in the treasure, the blood, the life of the subjects of both, to expiate the offence of one? When did the pagans of antiquity offer a more absurd, a more savage, a more impious sacrifice to their infernal gods?.....Is it a pittance of property unlawfully seized and sequestered? What comparison is there between the greatest amount of property, the loss of which can affect but few, and the health, the ease, the domestick comfort, the social happiness, the moral purity of millions? And by what right, human or divine, are millions to be exposed to privation, and suffering, and death, for the redress of such a grievance?....Is it some pretended, or even real outrage committed on particular persons? What advantage or consolation can it be to those persons to witness a vengeful conflict on their account, in which thousands, and tens of thousands of their fellow citizens, and among them, perhaps, their fathers, their sons, their brothers are slain? Where is the warrant for paying this dearest of all ransoms; and that too, without any certainty of recovering the captives, for whose redemption it is intended?

Hitherto I have said nothing of the extensive depravity of manners, attendant on war; the licentiousness, irreligion, profaneness, intemperance, fraud, perjury, oppression, and tyranny which it generates, nor of the consequent dangers, to which it subjects the souls, as well as the bodies of men. Add all these to the account, and then tell me, who that has any "fear of God before his eyes," will be first to declare it, and take up-

on himself the awful responsibility of all the slaughter, and robbery, and sacrilege, which follow in its ensanguined train: of all the torture, and anguish, and despair, of which it is the fruitful parent, both here, and hereafter? "O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slay men, and in their self will they dig down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel."*

Defensive war is sometimes, though not always necessary and allowable. It not unfrequently happens, that the people assailed have done much to excite irritation against them. In this event, it is palpably inconsistent with christian principles to begin or continue the combat, until equitable satisfaction has been offered and refused. And when "the cup of conciliation has been exhausted;" when every step, which seemed calculated to prevent or heal the breach has been taken; when there no longer remains a doubt, whether "an appeal to the last resort of injured nations" be perfectly justifiable, the interesting and important question, whether that appeal be expedient and practicable, requires a most serious and dispassionate investigation: a question so interesting and important; and so obvious, at the same time, to every considerate mind, that our Lord and Master mentions it as a matter of course; a matter, which no man of common understanding and common prudence can overlook or neglect: "What king" or ruler, "going to make war against another, sitteth not down first and consulteth, whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?" Whether he can encounter his

* Gen. xlix. 6, 7.

adversary on equal terms ; without hazarding more than he has any rational assurance of gaining by the precarious decision of battle ? What effect the adventure will naturally have upon the publick resources and energies ? Whether the private habitations and substance of the people be secure from hostile depredation ? And whether, all things considered, there be a probability of ultimate victory ?

Nor are these the only topicks, which invite attention. He is under a sacred obligation to count the cost : not only to contemplate the immense sums to be wrested from the hand of laborious industry ; but the waste of lives ; the corruption of morals ; the multiplication of parents deprived of their sons, wives of their husbands, children of their fathers and brothers ; and the vast concourse of heedless, unreflecting mortals of every description, to be hurried unprepared into the presence of their God and Judge.

These, all these, he is bound to weigh against the advantages to be derived, not to himself and his favourites only, but to the nation at large : And if it appear, that the enemy, by possessing a superiour disposable force, has power to diminish or annihilate the publick revenue at pleasure ; and, at pleasure, to make inroads, and commit spoliations absolutely ruinous to a great and respectable portion of the community : that, after all, there is little hope of achieving the objects in dispute : and that should they be achieved, the distress to be endured, and the pollution to be contracted, will far more than counterbalance all the benefits proposed, it were insanity and madness, in the extreme, not to pause, and make renewed efforts for an amicable accommodation.

II. This brings me, in the second place, to notice the measures, dictated by such a result of the preceding inquiries, respecting war: a result to which, passion, prejudice, and selfishness aside, they would seldom, if ever fail to lead....“ While the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace.”

I am aware, that I have here to contend with the deep rooted, and long established opinions, or rather prepossessions of an apostate world. So obstinate is the pride, so inveterate the anger, and so grasping the cupidity of the human heart, that most men instinctively spurn the idea of yielding ought to those, by whom they conceive themselves abused or injured. ‘What!’ say the arrogant tyrants of the earth, who “fare sumptuously every day,” and stand aloof from every danger, and, ‘What!’ rejoin the infatuated multitudes, who are to bear all the burdens of war, and to gain nothing but “harm and loss”* by its prosecution, ‘shall we succumb to an insolent foe, and tamely consent to withhold the chastisement which that insolence deserves? It were cowardice, it were treason, it were parricide to offer, or to receive terms of reconciliation, till we have enforced all our claims.’ And is it, indeed cowardice, is it treason, is it parricide to cultivate the spirit of the gospel; and, “if it be possible, as much as lieth in us, to live peaceably with all men?”† Is it cowardice, too, is it treason, is it parricide to cherish the benevolent sympathies of our nature; and, impelled by them, to deprecate and endeavour to avoid the effusion of blood; to preclude the agonizing tears of innumerable widows and orphans; to keep down the flood gates, which, if once opened, would

* Acts xxvii. 21.

† Rom. xii. 18.

pour upon this generation, at least, a torrent of impiety and vice, portentous to the temporal welfare of all, and productive of eternal misery to many? How came we absolved from an obligation, when acting in our civil capacity, which the volume of inspiration, and the common feelings of humanity confessedly impose upon us, in every other condition and relation of life?

Believe me, my brethren, it is no less displeasing to a holy God, and no less deserving of his righteous indignation, to harbour implacable animosity toward a national, than toward a personal adversary; and it is equally honourable and magnanimous, and equally essential to acquittance and justification, at the tribunal of heaven, to love, and bless, and pray for the former, as the latter. What king or kingdom, what ruler or people, ever yet forfeited their dignity and glory, by considering and treating their fellow beings of every realm, as brethren; by adopting a pacifick and conciliatory policy, in all their foreign intercourse; and, in case of rupture, by proposing or hearing overtures, tending to the restoration of harmony? Seldom indeed, perhaps never, when pursued with sincerity, has such a conduct failed of the desired effect: and were it universally exemplified, a perpetual end would be put to the wanton destruction of human life, and “nation would not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war any more.”*

How different, alas! is the course ordinarily pursued! “In our times, men go out of the way,” not to prevent, but “to seek occasions of war. Whatever makes for peace they run down in their sophistical speeches, or even basely conceal from the publick: but what ever tends to promote their favourite war system, they

* Mic. iv. 3.

“ industriously exaggerate and inflame, not scrupling to
 “ propagate lies of the most mischievous kind ; false or
 “ garbled intelligence, and the grossest misrepresenta-
 “ tions of the enemy. I am ashamed to relate what real
 “ and dreadful tragedies in real life, they found on
 “ these vile and despicable trifles : from how small an
 “ ember they blow up a flame, and set the world on fire.
 “ Then they summon before them the whole catalogue
 “ of supposed injuries received, and each party views
 “ its own grievance with a glass that magnifies beyond
 “ all bounds. But, as for benefits received, they all fall
 “ into the profoundest oblivion : so that, upon the whole,
 “ an impartial observer would affirm, that great men
 “ love war for its own sake, provided their own persons
 “ are safe.

“ After all the pretences thrown out, and the arti-
 “ fices used to irritate the vulgar, there often lurks, as
 “ the true cause of war, some mean and selfish motive,
 “ which is to force men to take up weapons, and kill
 “ one another, at the word of command, and as they
 “ wish to evince their loyalty.

“ Instead of a private and selfish object, there ought to
 “ be an object, in which, not only the publick, that is, not
 “ only one single community, but in which man, human
 “ nature, is deeply interested, to justify the commence-
 “ ment of war. But when they can find no cause of this
 “ kind, as indeed they seldom can, then they sit their
 “ wits to work, to invent some fictitious and plausible oc-
 “ casion for a rupture. They make use of the names of
 “ foreign countries, artfully rendered odious to the peo-
 “ ple, in order to feed the popular odium, till it becomes
 “ ripe for war, and thirsts for the blood of the” whole
 “ nation, whose very name is rendered a cause of hostil-
 “ ity. This weakness and folly of the very lowest of

“the people, the grandees increase, by artful insinuations, watch-words, and nicknames, cunningly thrown out in debates, pamphlets, and journals.”

This representation, my brethren, is not the production of my pen. It was written about three hundred years ago,* by the venerable Erasmus :† a man, to whom all christendom is indebted, as a principal agent, both in the revival of learning, and in the reformation of religion.

“That which has been is now.”‡ The spirit, so forcibly described, in the preceding quotation, is neither extinct, nor inactive, in our age and country. What else has plunged us into an unjust, precipitate, and needless war? unjust, because it is aggressive; precipitate, because we were utterly unprepared, at the moment, and are consequently unable, even now, to meet and repel its dangers; and needless, because the provocation, to avenge which it was professedly waged, was retracted, within five short days after its declaration,|| and would have been retracted, had it never been declared. But a few weeks had elapsed, when official intelligence of this retraction reached our ears, accompanied with the proposal of an armistice, and of another attempt to bring all matters of difference to a friendly and bloodless adjustment. Yes, my brethren—you will pardon the acknowledgment; for it is but an act of justice to acknowledge most explicitly, that our newly constituted enemy had the magnanimity, before he offered the least resistance to our arms, to “send an ambassage, and desire conditions of peace:” Not that he had rea-

* A. D. 1517. † See “The Complaint of Peace,” p. 78. London Edit. 1795. This excellent work is now to be had at Williams’ Bookstore, State Street, Boston; and it is to be wished that it may have an extensive circulation, and produce the salutary effects, to which it is adapted, in our backsliding, bleeding country.

‡ Eccl. iii. 15. || The war was declared 18, and the Orders in Council were rescinded 23 June, 1812.

son to fear, that his "ten thousand" would be swallowed up by our "twenty thousand." In point of numbers and strength, he had a decided superiority. We, if either party, needed a respite from impending disasters: for beside the defenceless state of our sea coast and frontier settlements, we had an immense aggregate of merchandise floating on the ocean, and exposed to almost inevitable capture. The proposal of pacification was, nevertheless, rejected, and claims, unnoticed before, were alleged, as a motive for continued hostility. For a while, the murmurs of disappointment were heard, even among the advocates of war. Yet by artificial excitements, these murmurs were soon hushed, or rather drowned by the louder accents of revenge; and the work of mutual destruction went on, till a glorious change in the face of Europe, again revived the hopes of "oppressed humanity." Once more "we looked for peace, and for a time of healing; but behold trouble."* Negotiation has, indeed, been resorted to, and all our original pretexts for unsheathing the sword, have been either removed, or abandoned. Still, however, other causes of irritation are devised and circulated; "threatening and slaughter are breathed out" by many; and with the smoking ruins of our national metropolis; with a treasury confessedly exhausted beyond the power of paying even the interest due to public creditors; and with consequent bankruptcy and dismemberment, if not absolute subjugation before our eyes, the most expensive measures to provide for the subsistence, and to fill the ranks of invading armies are proposed and adopted. Meanwhile, "the wicked walk on every side;"† iniquity abounds in its most degrading

* Jerem. xiv. 19.

† Ps. xii. 8.

forms; and the laws of God and man are set at unblushing defiance.

“This our way is our folly;”* and a degree of folly it is, which calls aloud for the deepest humiliation, the sincerest repentance, the most effectual amendment.

In vain do we supplicate divine forgiveness, protection, or deliverance, till we prostrate our souls at the footstool of “the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords;”† and confess, lament, and forsake our personal and our national sins; those sins, in special, by which we have more directly provoked his righteous displeasure, and subjected the land of our nativity to his tremendous frown. Pause then, my brethren; and, as in the presence of omniscient purity, ask, “from whence come wars and fightings among you?” It is a question intimately connected with your outward prosperity, and with your eternal salvation: a question, which it is not only your unalienable right, but your indispensable duty to decide for yourselves. Equally responsible to the Judge of quick and dead, for your conduct in this, as in all other cases, can you innocently resign yourselves to the impulse and direction of others, and rush on, like the horse to the battle? Pause then I say, and ask, “from whence come wars and fightings among you?” If “they come from hence, even of your lusts, that war in your members,”‡ they are totally repugnant to the genius of christianity; and to aid their progress, or prolong their duration, were to become, if not principals, accessaries, at least, to all

* Ps. xlix. 10.

† 1 Tim. vi. 15.

‡ James iv. 1.

the carnage and rapine, and desolation, and wretchedness occasioned by them.

‘But the laws of the land require it.’ And what if the laws of the land should require you to renounce your religion; to abjure your Saviour; and to discard and destroy your bibles? Ought you, therefore, to commit the horrid crimes? Or ought you to follow the example of the apostles and martyrs, and resolutely to “obey God rather than man?”*

Under these impressions, what are we to think of those, who, whilst they openly avow their belief, that the war is unjust, impolitick, and ruinous, voluntarily contribute by loans and otherwise, to its support, and even adopt the barbarous practice of privateering? a practice, which, however legalized, by the prevailing opinion and usage of the world, is no more capable of justification, either by reason or scripture, than high way robbery: a practice, which, beside its inhumane aspect on the lives and fortunes of unoffending individuals, and its obvious tendency to throw impediments in the way of returning peace, is demonstrably incompatible with the character and reward of christians.

“War is a game, which, were the people wise,
Kings would not play at.”

The people’s earnings, the people’s strength, the people’s toil, the people’s blood are all requisite to the prosecution of war. Were the people wise, therefore, would they eagerly fan their own funeral pile into a devouring flame? Would they engage, heart and hand, in conflicts, every blow of which must eventually fall upon themselves and their families? No: it would be beyond the power of the most absolute monarchies,

* Acts v. 29.

much more of elective governments, to draw or to drive them into an enterprise, so visibly fatal to their dearest interests. Convinced, that whoever might win, they were sure to lose ; that whoever might rise, they were fated to fall ; that whoever might rejoice, they must inevitably mourn, they would combine their efforts to oppose an insurmountable barrier to the mad career of all those, “ whose unnatural happiness depends upon the publick misery,” and who, therefore, wish for perpetual war.

‘ But how is this to be effected ?’.... Thanks be to God, for the independent sovereignty of the states,—the last hope of our republican liberty : and thanks be to God, for the long tried patriot, the exemplary disciple of the meek and lowly Jesus, now at the head of this commonwealth. As we may constitutionally, so, under providence, we may safely confide the protection of our rights to him, in conjunction with the council and legislature..... May “ the Father of lights, from whom cometh down every good gift, and every perfect gift,”* communicate to him, to them, and to us, that wisdom from above, which is “ profitable to direct.”

My brethren, “ the hour cometh, and now is,”† when, unless something be done to prevent it, you must witness scenes of agony.—Witness, did I say?—You must endure scenes of agony, unparalleled, but in the recent annals of imperial France.—Beside the accumulating load of taxes to be laid upon you ; beside the desolating incursions, to which you are exposed, at almost every point of your immensely extended borders, both by sea and land ; beside the personal privations

* James i. 17.

† John iv. 23.

and sufferings, which you feel and fear, already have you been threatened with a despotick conscription, more oppressive than the severest levies of money ; more terrific than the ravages of fire and sword ; more insupportable than poverty and death. This conscription is a favourite project. It has been attempted and urged in a variety of different forms : and though suspended for the present ; yet, if the war be suffered to continue, it will unquestionably be revived, and may soon tear your fathers, your husbands, your sons, your brothers from all the endearments of home, to fight in the cause of invasion : a cause which many of them view with the deepest abhorrence. Your minors too, children, as yet scarcely loosed from the nursery, and ignorant, if not incapable of hardship, it may banish from their native mansion, and compel, in defiance of all the claims, and entreaties, and tears of parental tenderness, to finish their education, and probably their days, not in the instructive schools, and with the harmless companions, to which they have hitherto been accustomed ; but amid the perilous occupations, the brutal vices, and the infernal dialect of a camp.

“ Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly : Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders ; gather the children, and those that suck the breasts ; let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet. Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach. Then will the Lord be jealous for his land, and pity his people.”*