

"You're blessed when you can show people how to co-operate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family" Matthew 5:9 (The Message)

At the beginning of this new year, two events have been prominent in our news reports over the past few weeks. In Haiti we witnessed the devastation caused by the earthquake; and closer to home, we look back at the political events leading to our part in the war in Iraq. The events in both those countries resulted in similar outcomes – loss of life, destruction of property, collapse of political and social systems. One was the result of the forces of nature, over which we have no control, and sometimes little way of lessening the effects. The other was a human decision to use force, in the belief that even greater suffering would be prevented in the future.

The debate over our involvement in Iraq will probably never be settled, and as time moves on it is harder to unpack what actually occurred. It is easy to criticise these things in hindsight; we were not the ones faced with the decisions. The enquiry may help us to approach such a situation differently in the future.

What strikes me is the different response we feel in each case. There has been worldwide sympathy and swift action to help the people of Haiti. Despite the inevitable practical difficulties and human shortcomings, our overwhelming response has been a united message of love and concern. The other situation has brought a very different reaction. The people of Iraq, and the military personnel and their families, seem to be largely ignored. The talk is of legalities and process, of reputations and careers. People are divided, contentious, angry and bitter. There is a deep sense of unease about a venture that was supposed to be creating a better future for our world.

When God calls us to behave in a certain way, it is not a simple case of an arbitrary decision, which we must blindly follow. The commandments through the Bible, whether formalized on Mount Sinai, or given through the teaching of Jesus, are about understanding who we are, and how this world is meant to operate. The call to peace is not a moral choice in the sense that it is one of a number of alternative options. It is God's intention that we live should care for and support one another; we are designed to live within such a society, and we feel unsettled when that is not the case. Something God-given stirs within us to respond to the people of Haiti, and also is troubled at the deliberate entering into conflict with our neighbour.

The call to peace is absolute, but the mechanism remains something for us to discern together. We should heed the call to pray for those who bear the responsibility in these global matters. But let's remember that there are many situations where we can make a personal contribution. Whether at home, in our workplace, or amongst our community, there are many opportunities to bring a word of peace, or a calming influence. Peacemaking is not just the task of the politician or UN negotiator – it is about each of us living in the way God designed us, and finding that place in his family.

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