

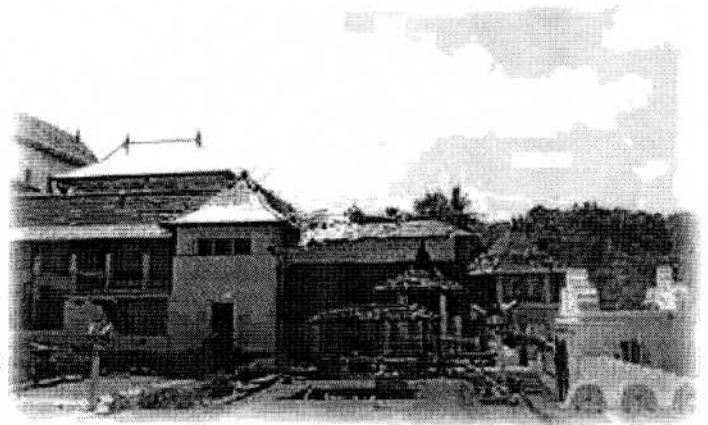
Peace in Lanka: what faiths can do

by Bishop Swithin Fernando

One cannot help being in continuous sadness for our people and our country, hearing of dozens upon dozens (if not hundreds upon hundreds) who are killed daily in the pursuit of the prevailing war.

It is frightening to see how far hardness of heart and mind, which war can often create, is spreading, resulting in killing and plunder all over the country.

In the days of my youth, I remember when there had been a murder or an outburst of violence anywhere in the country, verses were composed, printed and sung by those who were good at it, along streets and public places, with people rushing and buying one of the printed sheets (kavi kola) and for these verses to be sung in homes, and the gravity of the crime to be realised and taken to heart by all. Today killing and destruction is such common feature that these crimes hardly get impressed in our minds. If one gives a moment to think, one cannot but burst out with the cry, "How long are our people to go getting killed and survivors getting plunged into unconsolable grief and destitution? When are we going to get a glimpse of the dawn of a new day - a new life for our nation?"



The two most important topics of conversation among our people are, "The ongoing war" and "The package and the proposed new constitution." As for the war, I am sorry for it all. It is we who live in the comfort of our home and enjoy the frolic of social life that keep our men and women facing violent deaths night and day. While we hold our men and women in the forces in greatest respect we recognise that never has victory in war resulted in peace unless so many important factors are fulfilled. As for the package and proposals for a new constitution, serious problems must be faced and overcome.

In my reckoning, the two parties that have been most responsible for the present state of our nation are the United National Party, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, now merged with the People's Alliance. These are the two predominantly Sinhala parties. Neither party could bear to see the other party doing some good in the country and naturally, gaining political mileage. Something will be attempted with the maximum possible vehemence to sling mud at what is being attempted. A striking example of this were the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact and the Dudley Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact.

When the former was mooted the UNP sabotaged it and when the latter was mooted the SLFP sabotaged it. This goes on to date. Until and unless these two parties wake up to their folly and learn to place the nation before the party, history will keep on repeating itself.

Can we eat our food in peace, enjoy ourselves in social life and sleep in comfort unmindful of the fierce hazards faced by our men and women in forces, the gruelling anxiety throbbing in the hearts of their loved ones, the sense of destitution prevailing among the wounded and the maimed and those whose loved ones have been snatched by death or laid low, wounded?

This concern is for all the dead, all the wounded, all those who are flung into grief - those of all ethnic groups, those in the South and those in the North.

Having served as bishop in an area that went right round the coast of Sri Lanka among people of all races, religions and political persuasions, my concern is for all. We read in the newspapers about ongoing provision being made for the disabled service persons and for their bereaved families. This is most laudable. Will not the time come, with the end of war, when all the wounded and all the bereaved, whether they be in the South or North, East, West or Centre will have to come under the care of the whole nation and government? Decency and good religion will not permit us to divest ourselves of this responsibility. We are all children of Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, for the last few years, we have been divided into hostile camp.

I remember the visible beginning of this division. It was in 1958 when race riots first took place and the Tamil people in Colombo and suburbs were severely mauled and their homes and belongings destroyed. At that time there was a large number of Tamil people in Royal College that had been formed into a refugee camp. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, prime minister, called one of his trusted police officers, Harry van den Driesen, to ensure the safety and security of these persons.

Harry did an excellent job. He with his parents and family had spent his days in Jaffna. They had been educated in Jaffna and they could speak faultless Tamil and Sinhala in addition to English. With this background there was excellent rapport between the refugees and Harry, with his men. The refugees were perfectly safe and happy. Suddenly Harry was sent for and told that the refugees have to be shifted to Jaffna for safety and the shifting was to be done by ship. Harry stood aghast and this suggestion. "These are our people," he pleaded, "We must and we can look after them and sooner than later resettle them in their homes." Harry was Superintendent of Police, Colombo, but other opinions prevailed.

Once again, Harry was entrusted with the task of transporting the refugees from Royal College to the ships that were ready to take them. He worked hard at it and with all the people safely in the ships he watched with a sad heart until the ships took off. From the harbour he did not go to his office or his home but came straight to my home at St. Lukes' Vicarage, Borella and dropped himself heavily on the settee in our lounge saying very very sadly, "Swithin, I have just suffered the sadness of seeing the first step towards the division of this country."

When the Tamil people felt that they had to be sent for their safety to Jaffna then the concept and the cry of the homeland of the Tamils became a political thrust and now it is the war cry.

Our present life is unendurable. Reconciliation has to be sighted. War has to cease. Peace has to be established.

The package and the new constitution are in the melting pot. Many points of view need to be heeded and changes made but the move forward cannot cease. One of the major factors that must prevail in the present circumstances is that, before the war with the LTTE ceases, the war between the UNP and PA must stop. Political confrontation is an integral part of politics but not unhealthy bickerings among

security of our homes while so many hundreds of our men and women are, night and day, poised to kill or to be killed? To answer "No" to this question is to admit that all decency and human feeling have faded out of our lives and that the suprahuman powers of the faiths we profess in this country are simply not there, contrary to our claims.

No, the "Way Out" is possible and attainable. We must resolutely come together so that justice for all may be achieved soon. Prabhakaran and his associates in Sri Lanka and in other parts of the world must be approached if not by us alone but along with competent and well meaning persons and agencies in the world. What about the U.N.O./ What about the world bodies of the respective faiths practised by the people of our nation?

This process must start soon - today. In the meantime all bickering that are going on now - political or otherwise, must cease forthwith.

I am saying this out of my trust in the saving power of the Saviour in whom I profess faith, and in my unyielding outreach to Prabhakaran and his party and, indeed to all people, as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died and whom to save, Christ lives.

3). At the human level it must be recognised that the pilgrimage is hindered not only by the unhealthy inhuman rivalry that prevails among us but also by a breakdown in trust between Sinhalese and Tamils because of lapses on both sides over the years. To see us through this problem could we not seek the help of a small group of facilitators? Why not the U.N.O.?

Finally, when all is said and done, the basis which we seek for our nation must be well grounded on the tenets of belief of our respective faiths. Politics will not help unless politics come under the light of religion. As an urgent step, could there not be a Day of Prayer or other religious observance according to the respective faiths, seeking peace in our nation? In this observance I would seek a special place for our parliamentarians and other politicians, that they lay aside their political differences but be bound together by the respective faiths they profess and meet together in a chosen place. For instance, all Buddhist parliamentarians regardless of party affiliations could meet say, in the sacred place that is the Dalada Maligawa; Christian MPs laying aside their party affiliations, and their denominational differences, could meet in one of their places of worship and similarly the Hindus and Muslim in places of their choice. It can be a day of such observance to our whole nation not excluding the L.T.T.E. whom we should approach.

Don't our hearts throb with expectancy at what really can be the outcome of such religious devotion and trust in the power of true religion to save man from the havoc he can create for himself?

We heed the words of the Dhammapada:

"Not by hatred is hatred overcome. It is overcome by Love. This is an eternal Law".

Similarly we heed the words of our Lord Jesus:

"Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can you be the children of your Heavenly Father..... there must be no limit to your goodness, as your Heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds".

political parties and their allies. When the bombing took place in Kandy, in my articles to the papers, I pleaded that this sad incident be not made an occasion for yet another exercise of mud-slinging between the PA and the UNP; but sure it did. When the UNP placed the responsibility for this on the government the spokesman for the government gleefully resurrected the incident of the bomb - throwing at the sacred Bo tree during the UNP regime.

When the story came about of President Chandrika making the offer to Prabhakaran for him to exercise responsibility over the Northern Province for ten years, the UNP capitalised on it to discredit President Chandrika. Immediately the PA spokesman rushed to counter this accusation by reminding how the UNP entertained LTTE delegates in Five Star hotel comfort on an earlier occasion. That each of these happenings took place under special circumstances and in a relevant context was conveniently forgotten or wickedly ignored.

If this spirit does not stop now we shall be crying too late and generations of Sri Lankans yet to be born will hold us in utter condemnation. Our destiny is in peril. Surely the elementary decencies of enlightened human nature are not dead among us.

All must realise and accept the responsibility that lies on all of us at this crucial juncture. Let us have our political view points expressed firmly but not abrasively. The nation is bleeding. Heed the blood that is flowing, lives that are getting lost. Let us be so honest with ourselves that we reawaken ourselves to the Truths that we profess to live by - Loving kindness and Maithriya, Forgiveness and Reconciliation; all leading to Peace - Peace with one another, and all together with the Supreme Divine that is beyond us and above us.

Towards this end, I dare suggest two concrete steps that I consider worth taking:

1). In conversation with some of my Tamil friends I have discovered that they are in great measure happy about the present political proposals although some important changes are desired. Trusting the present trends one of them stated that the bid for Eelam can safely be dropped. The definition of the state in Section 1 of chapter 1 of the government's proposals appears to give them the security that they justifiably seek, with a place of dignity in the life of the total nation:

i) ... Sri Lanka is one, Sovereign and Independent Republic, being an indissoluble union of Regions, and shall be known as the Republic of Sri Lanka.

ii. It shall be the duty of the People and of the State to safeguard the independence, sovereignty, unity and the territorial integrity of the Republic.

When this is the position cannot our Tamil friends make an open declaration of ceasing to claim Eelam as hitherto understood and, therefore, to drop even the letter E from their titles? If they will do this it will bring a tremendous sense of re-assurance to all and make the way forward much less difficult.

2). The question is, "will Prabhakaran fall in line with this?" Most likely he will not. What will happen then? Will he remain isolated and a person whose life is in constant peril? A man is being searched with the risk of being killed will strive to kill as many others as possible before he himself is killed. That is what is going on now. This must stop.

Is there no way out through this sad and dark deadened, waiting and watching in the comfort and

All religions call us to forgiving Love, which is the only foundation for lasting peace.

Back

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