

17/11/2013. Christianity and physical fighting for yourself, your faith, your community; martial arts

Last weekend was our country's annual Remembrance of our war dead. How should Christians view war and remembrance? Is Christianity pacifist, or only for wimps – gentle Jesus, meek and mild?

The secular media often choose Christian men to interview who come across as wimps, which is misleading. Redeemed masculinity means bravery and self-sacrifice; it is unredeemed masculinity that means cowardice or its flipside, bullying. Jesus Christ performed the archetypal act of male heroism, seen in good war films: *He gave his life for his brothers*. Jesus chose the cross himself (John 10:18). Our faith offers a noble leader who sacrificed himself for his friends yet took on even death and defeated it; a freeman's choice between good and evil; and a hero's reward for the steadfast. Many brave men of arms became Christians in the early church. Christian life is as much a battle as any fight in non-Christian epic literature such as the Norse Sagas, the ancient Greek warriors of Homer, or the Mahabharata. But for us the battle is spiritual, even if our opposition persecutes us with physical force, for "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but... against the spiritual forces of evil... (Ephesians 6:12). In the Christian armour that St Paul's passage then speaks about, all but one component is for defence, and the other is the sword of the Holy Spirit. This refers to words (Ephesians 6:17, Hebrews 4:12). Jesus clashed bitterly with the Pharisees (Matt 23), but never resorted to physical force against humans (the whip mentioned in John's account of the cleansing of the Temple is clearly used on the sheep and oxen only, and was designed only to sting them through their wool or thick hide). Do not feel aggrieved that it is unfair to face physical violence with words for the sake of our faith. Do you expect Satan to fight by Queensberry rules? We should be glad if our faith is enough to threaten the forces of evil in this world (Matthew 5:11; Luke 6:22); until Jesus returns, all who wish to live a godly life will suffer for it (2 Tim 3:12). He will come back to rout the enemy, and we shall come back with him.

Jesus or the apostles are not recorded in scripture as telling anybody to quit the army when they become a believer in him, including the Roman centurion (Luke 7). So Christians are not compelled to pacifism. Although Christians must not fight physically in furtherance of the church, I believe we may – and in some circumstances should – fight physically to defend our community, country and family. I think that the battle to get or keep the Nazis – an evil and purely Germanic movement – out of non-Germanic lands was justified, for instance. Ancient Israel was often told by God to do battle. Mediaeval theologians had insightful discussions about when war was just, although I do not think they spoke the last word. War is due to man's sinful nature – desire for plunder, envy, differences in culture (race, language and religion) – so it will be with us to the end of the age. You should, however, think carefully about what armed conflicts a volunteer army might be sent to before joining up.

Because army training routinely includes unarmed combat (and did in Jesus' day), there is nothing intrinsically wrong with learning combat techniques. Unarmed combat is based on the fact that there are only a finite number of effective moves, and for each way you can be attacked you practice repeatedly the responses to each (defence based on blocks and movement feeding into attacking countermoves). Strength is not the issue, but rather awareness, speed, knowledge ingrained by practice, and determination. Fitness helps. A lot of mystique swirls around the subject, but it is no more or less mystical than any other physical activity in which the stakes are high. The amount of mysticism is simply a matter of cultural taste. Most martial arts taught in the West today were developed in the Far East and include aspects of Far Eastern spirituality. Some of those aspects need to be avoided. Be discerning and remember that 'occult' means hidden, but don't be spiritually panicked. When to use such knowledge? It is right to intervene physically if you see an elderly lady being mugged, and you also have the right to defend yourself if randomly attacked by people you don't know. Jesus allowed his followers to be armed (Luke 22:38) and even told them to carry swords (Luke 22:36), although he himself waived the right to be fought for by others in order to go to his cross (John 18:10-11). He knew what he was called to do – and so will you, if you keep faith.