**A Problem Like Syria**

Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) should be enough to persuade us of the deeply ambiguous nature of existence in the time before the final harvest.

There is ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and both grow together until the end. Until then, we take seriously the inevitable messiness of life and the requirement for caution in some moral judgments. Unambiguous clarity is not always possible.

The alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime on its civilians has reignited debates on the principle of armed intervention. This week has seen threat and counter-threat, risking the escalation of conflict. Promises of action from Trump, May, and Macron have been countered with promises of reprisals from Putin, with Syrian civilians caught in the middle. While non-intervention is seen by some as appropriately cautious, others see it as an abdication of moral responsibility. There are MPs on both sides, campaigners on both sides, Syrians on both sides. And Christians – including Syrian Christians – are on both sides too.

For all of us, a bigger picture may provide some perspective. The Old Testament prophets make it clear that God holds nations to account. A nation or a people cannot conduct itself as though it were an ultimate end in itself. It must understand its own life in the context of a larger dynamic of which it is a part – and which will answer ultimately to God. There isn’t a direct match between ancient nations addressed by the prophets and their modern counterparts, but there is an uncanny resemblance in the reasons for which they are indicted – pride, greed, violence, injustice – and no one nation has a monopoly on those.

Indeed, the line between good and evil, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (who had good reason to yearn for regime change) reminded us, runs through our own hearts.

Prophetic sayings against the nations weren’t designed to deal with nitty-gritty decision-making in international politics. But they brought hope to the people of God – of his unrivaled supremacy in the world, and of his plan to bless all nations even while holding them to account.

Ambiguity about the best way forward needn’t lead to inaction or despair. Even when we can’t see it now, Christians of all people have reasons for hope and confidence. And to pray and work purposefully for things that make for peace now.



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