

Jesus the warmonger

There was a guest editorial in the Times last week by Joseph Loconte, a fellow at the Heritage Institute and a religious commentator on NPR, about Christ not being against war.

"That's why Jesus talked a great deal about punishment, and the moral obligation to oppose evil with a strong and swift hand. Human evil must be confronted, he said, not merely contained. Depending on the threat, a kind of 'pre-emptive strike' or judgment against evil might even be required."

Alas, there is no evidence I am aware of that leads to these conclusions. Who has read the books of the gospels and come away thinking Jesus was a kick-ass justice freak?

I could have done a better job beefing Jesus up. Jesus wasn't a wimp, and he occasionally flashed fire. He did drive the moneychangers from the temple. He raged against the routine injustices people committed without thinking. It is clear he was something of an egalitarian and feminist. He never sanctioned slavery, but we have to work hard to imagine him being indifferent to it.

But does any of this recommend the war in Iraq?

Jesus's prime directive was that people are not God, and should not take upon themselves the things that are God's. War is the ultimate presumption, in which God is always on our side.

Jesus counseled people to endure Caesar because there will always be tyrants, demanding the things that are rightly "theirs." But he did not defend Caesar, which is a different thing. As Octavian's directive illustrates, even tyrants have a part to play.

I don't know if Jesus was what we would call a pacifist, but he was damn close.

He healed the ear of the soldier that Peter injured.

He counseled peace of heart and mind, and meekness (humility, not limp-wristedness), and goodwill toward men.

He was at his greatest with foreigners and outcasts -- the good Samaritan, the woman at the well, Magdalen the prostitute, the Gergesenes, the tax collectors and centurions.

He believed in the best in people. War does the opposite, it gives up on the humanity of the other side. It suspends the rules of civilization -- one might say or love and respect -- until "the right thing" can be done.

He suggested that our neighbor is like God, just as God is like us. We are still pondering that impossible riddle.

He recommended that we forgive seven times seventy times. Patience and forbearance are regnant virtues, because they call to the best in our natures, the best in the open-hearted child and the best in the understanding adult.

He told Judas (the warrior Zealot) that Judas did not understand him.

He posited that the greatest virtue is love, and he put his money where his mouth was.

He let Rome kill him. He let Satan tempt him. He let idiots misunderstand him. He let turkeys prattle on in his presence.

How would he have felt about Hitler? Tom Cahill suggests that the best thing for us to remember is that Jesus, along with Athens, is the cornerstone of western democracy, because he believed that individuals matter, that they have dignity, and deserve respect because they see through the eyes of God, from the humblest to the greatest.

Take it from there ...