

## Awkward Truths on 9/11

"If everyone was a bit nicer to each other, we wouldn't have wars". How many times have you heard, or thought this? Two recent events here illustrated that sometimes we may need to be awkward rather than nice in the cause of peace.

On the eve of 9/11 sixty volunteers welcomed Gandhi to St Ethelburga's, courtesy of Madame Tussaud's. Seeing the life-size waxwork standing in the building was very striking. His presence was designed to draw attention to the fact that 11 September 2006 was not just the fifth anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Centre, but the hundredth anniversary of Gandhi's first public commitment to the path of non-violent resistance. The word he used was *satygraha* – literally "the force of truth". He advocated "securing rights by personal suffering... the reverse of resistance by arms". Self-sacrifice becomes not only a means of self-realisation, but it sets loose the overwhelming power of truth against the compromised force of injustice.

In practice, Gandhi applied this ethic through many forms of civil disobedience, most famously by picking up a handful of salt, then subject to a British monopoly. He aimed to replace "strife with concord", but this involved rejecting the polite "British" way of doing things which usually meant tacit collusion with injustice.

Peace Pilgrim was another person who recognised that peace-making might involve some rocking of the boat. After an unexceptional middle-class life in the American mid-West, in 1953 Peace Pilgrim gave away all her belongings, including her name and every cent of her money, and set out to walk around the US "until mankind has learned the way of peace, walking until given shelter and fasting until given food." She continued to do this until her death 28 years and tens of thousands of miles later. The film we showed about her recently at St Ethelburga's showed that her single-mindedness inspired and touched many thousands of people. But we could also sense something quite uncomfortable, even irritating in her uncompromising manner. Not someone to invite to a dinner party for witty repartee.

Although both devised eye-catching forms of public action, neither Peace Pilgrim nor Gandhi concentrated just on methods. Both attached primary importance to self-imposed "vows" about how they conducted their lives and both spent many years practicing detachment from material needs. To dismiss their actions as "utopian" or "naïve" is to fail to understand what they both say about the crucial importance of rooting

external action on hard-won "inner freedom" (Gandhi) or "inner peace" (Peace Pilgrim).

September 11 was also the day on which the great Hindu leader Vivekenanda opened the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. This was the first formal gathering of Eastern and Western religious traditions, in which much contemporary inter-faith activity can find roots. At its outset Vivekenanda drew attention to the dangers of what we now call fundamentalism "Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful Earth... I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword..."

The industrial-scale murders in the Twin Towers might suggest that the bell is still being ignored, despite more a century of inter-faith dialogue. We all know that frustration and powerlessness about world events can lead to the implication of religion in terrifying violence aimed at achieving sectarian advantage. Gandhi and Peace Pilgrim demonstrate that non-violent resistance provides a radical means of resistance when it is grounded in an uncompromising search for the truth. Gandhi's record shows just how far this idea can go in transforming the political and social realms. Someone somewhere has probably labelled this "being awkward for God". I find that a nicer thought, somehow, than just being nice.

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