

The danger of modern war

When the disciples asked him about the signs of the End and of his Return, Jesus referred to war as a sign of coming judgment. Obviously, war has occurred throughout the last 2000 years, so, in itself, it is not a sign of the timing of the End. However, Jesus stresses that it is a reminder. “You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come ... All these are the beginning of birth-pains.” (Matt 24:6, 8; Mk 13:7-8). The “birth-pains are the birth pains of the Messiah, the events leading up to his return. Jesus wants us to take note of war as a reminder of his return. But it is an early sign. He adds “When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.’ Then he said to them: ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Lk 21:9-10).

However, it is a fact that modern warfare is more potentially apocalyptic. We are now capable of destroying most, if not all, of humanity. That surely is a stronger reminder and, alongside other significant events, suggests we are near to the End.

The false sense of security over nuclear weapons

To some extent, the world has been lulled into a false sense of security, since the fall of the USSR in 1991. It seemed that the danger of nuclear conflict, which characterised the decades of the Cold War, had receded into the background. Russia’s war against Ukraine has put an end to such naivety. Given an extremist politician with nuclear weapons, the danger of nuclear war is still real. There are a number of such leaders, with access to nuclear weapons, in the world today. Vladimir Putin is one such. Russia has more nuclear weapons than any other country.

The Russia-Ukraine war is still going on at the time of writing. But, even if it ends without nuclear conflict, the danger of such conflict still remains in the world. Currently, North Korea, with its extremist leader, is experimenting with and showing off its nuclear weapons, threatening South Korea and, to some extent, Japan. Despite the efforts of other nations to stop it becoming a nuclear power, Israel and others believe that Iran, with its extremist leadership, is steadily moving towards having nuclear weapons and is threatening Israel, which is a nuclear power. President Zelenskyy of Ukraine said in October 2022 that Iran providing Russia with suicide drones to attack Ukraine is likely to result in Russia helping Iran to become a nuclear power. Iran makes threats against Israel and the Israelis have nuclear weapons. Iran gaining nuclear weapons will create a very dangerous situation in the Middle East. Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid commented “Iran is a dangerous terrorist state, and the fact that Russia does business with it puts the whole world in danger.” China, again with extremist leadership, is a nuclear power. India and Pakistan have had regular conflicts and both are nuclear powers.

The danger is not just extremist leaders but the possibility of nuclear conflict by mistake. If a country receives what it mistakenly sees as a nuclear attack it has to act very quickly to defend itself, and this could lead to such a nuclear conflict by mistake. Vince Cable, ex-Leader of the UK Liberal Democrats, warned in September 2021 “The risks around nuclear war and weapons proliferation have slipped out of public consciousness. They mustn’t ... the nightmare scenario of terrorists getting hold of nuclear weapons is a risk that has to be contemplated.”

The Russia-Ukraine war caused political leaders and other significant leaders to wake up to the dangers still facing the world.

In August 2022:

- Antonio Guterres, UN General Secretary said we were in a time of nuclear danger not seen since the height of the Cold War. Almost 13,000 nuclear weapons are now being held in arsenals around the world, he added ... humanity is “just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation.” He referred to the “simmering tensions” in the Middle East and Asia and said “By adding the threat of nuclear weapons to enduring conflicts, these regions are edging towards catastrophe.”
- Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, said “Our world is at greater risk of nuclear catastrophe than at any time since the height of the cold war. Nuclear catastrophe is not an abstract threat but a real world risk. Nuclear weapons could be deployed in a conflict, as Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, has intimated.”

- The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported in August 2022 that “All of the nuclear-armed states are increasing or upgrading their arsenals and most are sharpening nuclear rhetoric and the role nuclear weapons play in their military strategies.” Simon Tisdall, Foreign Affairs Correspondent for *The Guardian* commented “As much as anything, the reawakened spectre of nuclear annihilation is the product of a defining 21st-century phenomenon: the increasingly anarchic refusal of states to uphold international law and the UN-underwritten, post-1945 global order.”

In October 2022:

- Joe Biden, US President, said the risk of a nuclear "Armageddon" is at its highest level since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

In 2019 the world's nuclear-armed countries spent a record \$73 billion on their weapons. The Trump administration spent \$35.4 billion of it. In the same year the Princeton University Science and Global Security programme said that over 90 million people would be killed or injured in a nuclear war between the US and Russia and that Europe could be destroyed by a nuclear war between Russia and NATO.

Disagreements over nuclear weapon agreements

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which came into force in 1970, aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and to achieve nuclear disarmament. The treaty commits nuclear-armed states to saying they will never use nuclear weapons on a non-nuclear armed state, so that the latter won't seek to acquire its own nuclear weapons. But the UK, under Boris Johnson, decided to increase its nuclear warheads by 40% to 260, which violates an international legal agreement. It had previously been committed to reduce the number to 180 by the mid-2020s. The UK also said that it reserves the right to withdraw assurances that it will not use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear armed state “if the future threat of weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical and biological capabilities ...”

The 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which came into force in January 2021, prohibits the development, testing, production, storage, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons.” Many nations signed it but not the US, UK, France and Russia. Also, various non-nuclear members of NATO opposed the treaty because they think it is "incompatible with the policy of nuclear deterrence, which has been essential to keeping the peace in Europe and North Asia for over 70 years."

China is rapidly increasing its nuclear weapons arsenal not least to gain a strategic advantage over the US in any future war over Taiwan. In October 2021 China unexpectedly fired a hypersonic missile, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, which circumnavigated the world. It is more advanced than the US expected, and could evade US defence systems.

In 2019 both the US and Russia withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty which banned intermediate range cruise and ballistic missiles. These missiles take only a short time to reach their targets compared to the intercontinental ballistic missiles. This would give decision-makers little time to assess the danger and could therefore cause a nuclear conflict over a false warning.

Again in 2019, the UK House of Lords' International Relations Committee chairman, Lord Howell of Guildford said: “We are now dangerously close to a world without arms control agreements, paving the way for a new arms race and for increased risk of nuclear weapons use. Disintegrating relationships between nuclear possessor states, new capabilities and technologies, mixed with a lack of communication and understanding, mean that the risk of nuclear weapons being used is greater now than it has been since the Cold War.”

So, there is no secure agreement to ban nuclear weapons.

Religious motivation for war

It is well-known that extreme Islamism is a strong and widespread motivation for war. But it is disturbing that Vladimir Putin and some of his colleagues have “Christian” motives for waging war.

Putin has spoken at times about his faith and has formed an apparently close bond with certain members of the clergy, including Archimandrite Tikhon, who has reported that Putin prays daily in a small chapel next to the presidential office.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has described Mr Putin's leadership as a religious miracle. He described the invasion of Ukraine as part of a "metaphysical" struggle against a decadent West. Having become a vassal of the sinful west, Ukraine must be saved and restored to "Holy Rus." He accuses the West of seeking to weaken Russia.

Putin regards the church as a powerful ally in creating a strong Russian state. Under Putin, the Church and nationalism are increasingly closely united. In March 2022 he said publicly "To save people from genocide is the main motive of the operation that we launched in Donbas and Ukraine." He added "The words from the holy Scripture come to my mind: 'There is no greater love than if someone gave his soul for his friends'"

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams wrote: "Vladimir Putin sees himself as the protagonist in a battle for the survival of an integral Christian culture. The Patriarch and others see the Western agenda not as a genuine liberal pluralism but as what we might call "coercive tolerance," in which toleration is only a first step towards enforcement – at the very least of the recognition of Western ideals."

War causes a record number of refugees

A record number of people fled their homes because of violence and conflict in 2021. There were 53.2 million people internally displaced globally in 2021, plus 27.1 million refugees. The numbers are steadily growing each year.

Non-nuclear warfare

Sir Stephen Lovegrove, UK national security adviser, warned in July 2022 that the world is entering a "dangerous new age of proliferation" and could "collapse into uncontrolled conflict." He referred to cyber warfare together with "space-based systems, 'genetic weapons', ... directed energy weapons and hypersonic glide vehicles." Cyber warfare is used for espionage, counterintelligence, sabotage, and pilfering.

An example of cyber warfare is Russia seeking to promote Donald Trump's election campaigns in 2016 and 2020 and interfering in the UK Brexit referendum. An Israeli firm has created a cyber tool called Pegasus which can hack someone's phone without the owner clicking on or opening anything.

Another issue is fully autonomous weapons or "killer robots." Armed drones have been developed and used by nations including China, Israel, Russia, South Korea, the UK and US. These weapons are able to select and kill targets without human oversight. Various countries are calling for human control to be retained over the use of force. But some countries such as Russia and the US are opposing such proposals. General Carleton-Smith, ex-Chief of Staff of the British Army said recently "Robotics are the next horizon in terms of being the new arrow in the quiver."

Then there is bioterrorism. Bill Gates has warned against bio-terrorist-caused epidemics, such as smallpox.

Finally, there are space-based weapons. Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan (head of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy's Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme) said in 2019 "Space will, no doubt, be the next war fighting domain." He described two types of such weapons: anti-satellite technologies, which are used to disrupt or block satellite transmissions, and "space-based weapons", which are capable of targeting earth and other objects in orbit.

An attack on a satellite constellation, such as the US Global Positioning System could halt ATM banking transactions, blackout navigation applications on users' smartphones, etc.

Conclusion

Modern warfare is indeed potentially apocalyptic. It could destroy most, if not all, of humanity. As Jesus said, we should note this and regard it as a reminder and early sign of the coming End Times.