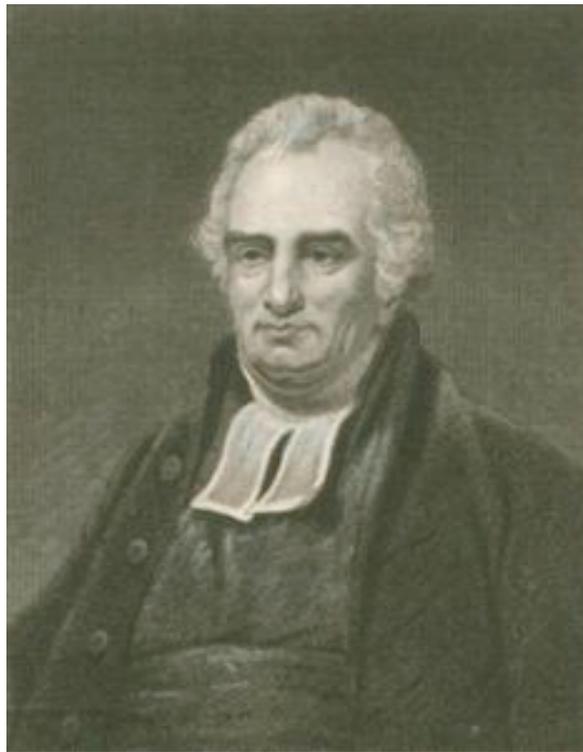


THE BEST OF THE OLL #2

Vicesimus Knox, "The Prospect of Perpetual and Universal Peace" (1793)

"War, that giant fiend, is stalking over empires in garments dropping with the blood of men, shed by men, personally unoffended and unoffending"



Vicesimus Knox (1752-1821)

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Editor's Introduction

Vicesimus Knox (1752-1821) was an English minister who ran afoul of the British authorities in the 1790s with his sermons opposing the war against the French. He was educated at home by his father, attended St. John's College, Oxford, where he became a fellow, and then was headmaster of Tonbridge School from 1778 to 1812. His main work, *The Spirit of Despotism* (1795), is an analysis of how political despotism at home can arise under the cover of fighting a foreign war.

This extract is part of a series for "The Twelve Days of Christmas" on the theme of "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men" [Luke 2:14]

The radical anti-war English minister Vicesimus Knox got into a lot of trouble with the authorities when he began preaching against the British and other European monarchies' efforts to defeat the new French Republic by force of arms during the 1790s. He reminded them that "the motto of Christianity" had been clearly stated in Luke II, 14, namely "peace on earth and goodwill towards men." What makes this sermon rise above the sometimes empty homilies about peace which are offered up at Christmas time are his profound moral and political objections to war.

Knox's solution to the problem of war is "to compose the differences of nations by negotiation" "in a league of philanthropy" and to return to the Christian ideal of considering "all men under the sun, as united to us by brotherly love, or, as it is termed, fraternity; natural, not political fraternity; the strong tie of one common nature". In this way Christian principles would come into "full force" and "the sword of offensive war (would) be sheathed for ever, and the din of arms would at last be silenced in perpetual peace."

***"Glory to God in the highest, on earth
peace, good will towards men." [St.***

Luke, ii. 14]

SERMON XXV. “The prospect of perpetual and universal peace to be established on the principles of Christian philanthropy.”
[Preached at Brighton, Aug. 18, 1793.]¹

St. Luke, ii. 14, — Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men.

This gracious proclamation from Heaven announces the great purpose of Jesus Christ, the promotion of piety to God and benevolence to man. It may indeed be called the motto of Christianity. It may form the inscription on its unstained banners, as it advances in its progress, endeavouring to diffuse the blessings of perpetual peace and universal love....

Our Saviour’s own words of invitation are indeed sweetly persuasive, if the world would hear them, amidst the cares of avarice, the struggles of ambition, and the clangor of arms. Come unto me, says he, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.

Who among us is not concerned in this address, which of us is not labouring with some evil or laden with some sin, some infirmity, some habitual passion or some sore disease?

In what part of Christendom is that Christianity which we all profess, suffered to have its full effect, either on the national character and conduct, or on the regulation of private life?

Give me leave to bring before you, for a few moments, the great picture of the living world, as it is now exhibited, in the most polished part of it, Europe, enlightened as it is by science and professing Christianity. Let us consider whether among those who bear rule, by power or by example, glory is duly given to god; whether they do really promote to the utmost of their power, peace on earth; and whether they seem to entertain good will towards men, in that extent and degree which the Gospel of Jesus Christ requires of all who profess to believe it, and who expect the rewards of the pious and the peaceful.

“war, that giant fiend, is stalking over empires in garments dropping with the blood of men, shed by men, personally unoffended and unoffending”

The picture is sadly shaded with misery. Peace on earth! Alas where is it? amid all our refinement in the modes of cultivated life, all our elegant pleasures, all our boasted humanity, war, that giant fiend, is stalking over empires in garments dropping with the blood of men, shed by men, personally unoffended and unoffending; of men, professing to love as brethren, yet cutting off each other from the land of the living, long before the little time allotted them by nature is elapsed; and increasing beyond measure, all the evils to which man is naturally and morally doomed, at the command of a narrow shortsighted human policy, and an ambition which, considering the calamities it causes, I must call accursed.

“The shades of the picture are black as death, the colouring of blood. No; not all the arts of politicians can veil its shocking deformity, from any eyes but those of the vulgar; the vulgar, I mean, rich as well as poor; titled as well as untitled, swaying sceptres or wielding a spade.”

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¹ Vicesimus Knox, “Sermon XXV. “The prospect of perpetual and universal peace to be established on the principles of Christian philanthropy” in *The Works of Vicesimus Knox* (1824), vol. 6, <oll.libertyfund.org/title/1017/141738>.

must be deprecated as the disgrace and calamity of human nature. Poor outside pageantry! What avails the childish or womanish finery of gaudy feathers on the heads of warriors? Though tinged with the gayest colours by the dyer's art, they appear to the eye of humanity, weeping over the fields of battle, dipt in gore. What avail the tinsel, the trappings, the gold and the scarlet? Ornaments fitter for the pavilions of pleasure than the field of carnage. Can they assuage the anguish of a wound, or call back the departed breath of the pale victims of war; poor victims, unnoticed and unpitied, far from their respective countries, on the plains of neighbouring provinces, the wretched seat of actual war; not of parade, the mere play of soldiers, the pastime of the idle spectator, a summer day's sight for the gazing saunterer; but on the scene of carnage, the Acelanda, the field of blood, where, in the fury of the conflict, man appears to forget his nature and exhibits feats at which angels weep, while nations shout in barbarous triumph.

The elegant decorations of a sword, wantonly drawn in offensive war, what are they, but a mockery of the misery it was intended to create? An instrument of death to a fellow-creature who has never injured me, a holiday ornament! Colours of the darkest hue might form the appropriate habiliments of those who are causelessly sent as the messengers of death; of death, not to animals of another species, fierce and venomous; but to those who like themselves, were born of woman, who sucked the breast of a woman, and who, if spared by the ruthless sword, must like themselves in a few short years die by the necessity of nature; die, and moulder into dust, under the turf once verdant and flowery, but now crimsoned with human gore. Alike born the victors and the vanquished, alike they die if spared in the battle; and alike must stand at the latter day, all stript of the distinctions of finer dress and superior rank, in the presence of those whom they cut off in this world before their time, in youth and health, like rose-buds crompt in the bud of existence.

Cease, oh! cease, while such scenes are passing in the field of actual slaughter, cease, for humanity's sake, the din of martial music. It is surely a mockery of wretchedness! Poor artifice! to drown the voice of anguish calling for help, and calling in vain; the yells of the dying, the groans of those who lie agonizing without any hand to pour balsam into their wounds: cruel contrivance to stifle by noise the bitter lamentations, the last sad privilege of the mourners,

who bereaved of their friend, their parent, or their child, are bereaved indeed!

Oh war! thy blood-stained visage cannot be disguised by the politician's artifice. Thy brilliant vestments are to him who sympathizes with human woe in all climes and conditions, no better than sable mourning; thy melody, doleful discord, the voice of misery unutterable. Decked, like the harlot, in finery not thine own, thou art even the pest of human nature; and in countries where arbitrary power prevails, the last sad refuge of selfish cruel despotism, building its gorgeous palaces on the ruins of those who support its grandeur by their personal labour; and whom it ought to protect and to nourish under the olive shade of peace.

What feeling man can cast his eyes (as he proceeds in contemplating the picture) over the tented plains, on the theatre of war, glittering in the sunbeams with polished arms and gay with silken banners, without a sigh, if he views it undazzled by the "pride, pomp and circumstance," which the wisdom of this world has, from the earliest times, devised to facilitate its own purposes; purposes, it is to be feared, that have little reference to him who said, that his kingdom was not of this world; and whose religion was announced by a proclamation of peace on earth. What a picture is the tablet we are viewing of the heart of man, and of the misery of man! that he should thus find it necessary to defend himself with so much effort, at such expense of blood and treasure, not, as I said before, against the beast of the forest, not against the tiger and the wolf, for then it were well; but against his fellow man, his Christian brother, subject to the same wants, agonized with the same natural sufferings, doomed to the same natural death, and as a Christian, hoping for the same salvation; and perhaps separated from him only by a few leagues of intervening ocean.

All the waters of that ocean cannot wash away the stain thus deeply fixed on the human character.

Lo! in countries where war actually rages, thousands and tens of thousands of our fellow-creatures, all perhaps Christians in profession, many in the flower of their youth, torn from the peaceful vale, the innocent occupations of agriculture, or the useful employments of mechanic arts, to learn with indefatigable pains (separated at the same time from all the sweet endearments and duties of domestic life) to learn the art of spreading devastation and most expeditiously and effectually destroying those of their

fellow-creatures, whom politicians have bade them consider as enemies, and therefore to cut off in their prime; but whom Christ taught, even if they were personal enemies, to love, to pity, and to save. Do they not, thoughtless as they are, require to be reminded of the gracious proclamation from Heaven, "On earth peace, Good-will towards men."

Alas! is it not enough that age, disease, death, and misery, in a hundred forms, are hourly waging war with all mankind; but they must add to the sting of death new venom; new anguish to every pang by waging war with each other? Men who as individuals are kind and humane, appear as nations, still in a state of barbarism and savage nature.

Yet we must believe and maintain the political necessity of war, though the greatest evil which can be endured by a civilized, flourishing and free people; we must believe its political necessity, because they, who in the various nations of the world, seem to claim an hereditary right to wisdom, as well as power, have, in all ages and in the most enlightened and Christian countries, so determined; yet, with all due submission to that wisdom and to that power, let every man who justly glories in the name and feelings of a man, mourn and lament the existence of that political necessity; and if it be such, pray to the father of us all, of every clime and colour, that under the benign influence of that Christianity which we profess, war may be no more on the face of the whole earth, and the sword every where converted into the pruning hook and the plough share....

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devastation”***

Let us all, in our several stations, promote peace on earth, if it be possible; not only by seeking as we have power, to compose the differences of nations by negotiation, but by subduing our own pride and ambition, by learning to consider all men under the sun, as united to us by brotherly love, or, as it is termed,

fraternity; natural, not political fraternity; the strong tie of one common nature. Let us appeal to reason in all national disputes; to reason, the constituent essence of man, and not only to the sad resource of creatures without reason, brute force and violence....

If the Christian religion in all its purity, and in its full force, were suffered to prevail universally, the sword of offensive war must be sheathed for ever, and the din of arms would at last be silenced in perpetual peace. Glorious idea! I might be pardoned, if I indulged the feelings of enthusiastic joy at a prospect so transporting. Perpetual and universal peace! The jubilee of all human nature. Pardon my exultation, if it be only an illusive prospect. Though the vision is fugacious as the purple tints of an evening sky, it is enchanting; it is as innocent as delightful. The very thought furnishes a rich banquet for Christian benevolence. But let us pause in our expressions of joy, for when we turn from the fancied Elysium, to sad reality, to scenes of blood and desolation, we are the more shocked by the dismal contrast. Let us then leave ideal pictures, and consider a moment the most rational means of promoting, as far as in our power, perpetual and universal peace. If war be a scourge, as it has been ever called and allowed to be, it must be inflicted for our offences.

Then let every one, in every rank, the most elevated as well as the most abject, endeavour to propitiate the Deity, by innocence of life and obedience to the divine law, that the scourge may be no longer necessary. Let him add his prayers to his endeavours, that devastation may no more waste the ripe harvest, (while many pine with hunger,) burn the peaceful village, level the hut of the harmless cottager, overturn the palace, and deface the temple; destroying, in its deadly progress, the fine productions of art, as well as of nature: but that the shepherd's pipe may warble in the vale, where the shrill clarion and the drums dissonance now grate harshly on the ear of humanity; that peace, may be within and without our walls, and plenteousness in our cottages as well as in our palaces; that we may learn to rejoice in subduing ourselves, our pride, whence cometh contention and all other malignant passions, rather than in reducing fair cities to ashes, and erecting a blood-stained streamer in triumph over those who may have fallen indeed—but fallen in defending with bravery, even to death, their wives, their children, their houses, and their altars, from the destroying demon of offensive war.

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cannot be disguised by the politician’s
artifice. Thy brilliant vestments are to
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whom it ought to protect and to nourish
under the olive shade of peace.”*

O thou God of mercy, grant that the sword may return to its scabbard for ever; that the religion of Jesus Christ may be duly understood, and its benign influence powerfully felt by all kings, princes, rulers, nobles, counsellors, and legislators, on the whole earth; that they may all combine in a league of philanthropy, to enforce by reason and mild persuasion, the law of love, or Christian charity, among all mankind, in all climes, and in all sects; consulting, like superior beings, the good of those beneath them; not endeavouring to promote their own power and aggrandizement by force and arms; but building their thrones, and establishing their dominion on the hearts of their respective people, preserved from the horrors of war by their prudence and clemency: and enjoying, exempt from all unnecessary burthens, the fruits of their own industry; every nation thus blest, permitting all others under the canopy of heaven to enjoy the same blessings uninterrupted, in equal peace and security. O melt the hard heart of pride and ambition, that it may

sympathize with the lowest child of poverty, and grant, O thou God of order, as well as of mercy and love, that we of this happily constituted nation may never experience the curse of despotism on one hand; nor, on the other, the cruel evils of anarchy; that as our understandings become enlightened by science, our hearts may be softened by humanity, that we may be ever free, not using our liberty as a cloak for licentiousness, that we may all, in every rank and degree, live together peaceably in Christian love, and die in Christian hope, and that all nations which the sun irradiates in his course, united in the bonds of amity, may unite also in the joyful acclamation of the text, with heart and voice, and say, “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good-will towards men.”

Further Information

SOURCE

Vicesimus Knox, "Sermon XXV. "The prospect of perpetual and universal peace to be established on the principles of Christian philanthropy" in *The Works of Vicesimus Knox* (1824), vol. 6, <oll.libertyfund.org/title/1017/141738>.

FURTHER READING

More about Vicesimus Knox (1752-1821) <oll.libertyfund.org/person/3802>.

The collection of books in the Online Library of Liberty on "War & Peace" <oll.libertyfund.org/collection/57>.

The Topic on "The Laws of War" <oll.libertyfund.org/collection/62>.

***"The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State."
[Ludwig von Mises, "Liberty and Property" (1958)]***



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Another useful sampling of the contents of the site is the collection of weekly "Quotations about Liberty and Power" which are organized by themes such as Free Trade, Money and Banking, Natural Rights, and so on. See for example, Richard Cobden's "I have a dream" speech <oll.libertyfund.org/quote/326>.

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