

# The Abbey is right to honour submariners

Protesters should not scapegoat Royal Navy personnel who make heavy sacrifices for peace, says **Rosemary Durward**

THERE is a certain inevitability about the response of some senior clergy to a planned service next month at Westminster Abbey to mark 50 years of constant patrol by the UK's nuclear deterrent (News 5 April, Letters, 12 April).

Against the backdrop of the General Synod's commitment to the elimination of nuclear weapons (News, 13 July 2018), the complainants' main concern is that this service appears to celebrate nuclear weapons — even though the Abbey website states that its purpose is “to recognise the commitment of the Royal Navy to effective peace-keeping through the deterrent over the past fifty years and to pray for peace throughout the world”.

To the protesters, the Royal Navy personnel manning the UK independent nuclear deterrent are, by implication, representative of the weapons themselves. But, with a common goal of peace in the Church and in God's created order, it would be more compassionate and helpful to Christian understanding to see these submariners as steadfast bearers of the sins of the whole world.

THE obedience, courage, and selfless sacrifice of submariners (ask their families how much they see of them) is a stark reminder, after Palm Sunday, of the thin line that separates hero from scapegoat. To single out the few who have taken on the darkest task of all — literally and metaphorically — for the sake of peace seems to be dangerously akin to Pilate's actions, when he washed his hands before the criminal Barabbas was released, and the innocent one was taken away to be crucified. It is the scapegoat whom we are reminded of during Lent and Holy Week, remembering how Jesus did no wrong, and yet was sacrificed to expunge society's guilt.

On the subject of nuclear weapons, no sane person imagines that the world would undergo some sort

of a resurrection after an all-out nuclear exchange. All of humanity lives under the shadow of the possibility of devastating and rapid destruction from nuclear war, and this makes the imperative to work collectively for peace that much more urgent.

But, in the Christian just-war tradition, peace is not a virtue: it is an end brought about by considerations of justice and love. Against that, we should be mindful that bearing arms is not in the same moral category as their use. Intention and necessity are key here — and neither of these feature in a weapons system.

There is distinction to be made, after all, between the kitchen knife, used to chop potatoes but capable of defending against an armed intruder

Ending the war, after the deaths of so many millions, was judged to be a necessity.

NECESSARY or not, it is judgements about necessity and intent that are contested most. Given the moral complexity and the moral dilemmas that political leaders face daily, it would be far better for Christian protesters to engage with the political process, to which submariners are subordinate, than trying to exclude from God's grace a sector of the Royal Navy.

At the same time, it is vital that political leaders are accountable and fully conversant with the ethics of defence decision-making. The need to build a society that values integrity in its political leaders, and moral decision-making, could not be more urgent.

To that end, the Council on Christian Approaches to Defence and Disarmament, which has a long history of ecumenism and debate, invites participation from people of all faith traditions and none — including the civil service, politicians, serving and retired officers, academics, and non-governmental organisations — to engage seriously with ethical issues concerning the armed forces, military procurement and deployment, arms control, and disarmament, as well as defence and wider foreign and security policy.

More theological engagement from senior figures in the Churches would be welcome. There is no guarantee that there will be agreement — but there will at least be greater understanding on all sides.

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(assuming a lawfully proportionate and necessary response), and using the knife to commit a premeditated murder. The distinction shows how important intent and necessity are as benchmarks for legitimate action.

On moral grounds, if intention can be deduced from actions in hindsight, those involved in the decision to use nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki cannot escape moral responsibility for the consequences of their use — that is on their conscience.

But it is a collective as much as an individual's conscience, because, looking back at the last time nuclear weapons were used to end the war in the Far East, in a war that followed the so-called Great War, concerns about allied casualties would have been uppermost in everyone's minds.