

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 7, 2009 at 9:38am

My Holy Week journey to Creech air base

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Holy Week began for me this week in Denver, where I spoke to a crowd about Jesus' campaign of nonviolent resistance culminating millennia ago in Jerusalem. There he sized up the temple, stepped into its precincts and interfered with the money exchange -- a form of nonviolent civil disobedience. We all know the story: arrest was swift, brutal execution followed shortly.

In Denver we opened the story again and discussed our own modern-day Jerusalems and our own campaigns of resistance and civil disobedience. Many this week will march against war and injustice in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles. As for me, I'm headed with friends to the remote Nevada desert -- to the Creech Air Force Base in Indian Springs.

Creech, home to the 432nd Air Expeditionary Wing, is the command center for 'drones,' pilot-less warplanes that bombarded Iraq and now Pakistan and Afghanistan. They take to the air freighted with gasoline, cameras for spying -- and a complement of bombs. In recent months drones have buzzed over Pakistani land and mechanically ended the lives of some hundreds of civilians, some of them children.

Our new president has taken to this automatic technology born of nightmarish minds in the Pentagon and copiously employed by the previous administration. A 44th president and a promise of an era of change, but as usual the wily ways of war have us benumbed and transfixed. We have learned nothing. Administration to administration, the hovering, spying -- and impassive killing -- continue.

The U.S. inventory includes 5,300 drones, and they buzz not only above Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen -- but over the U.S.-Mexican border, tracking and filming new arrivals from the South, and pinpointing them for officers on the ground.

Drones stay aloft as long as 24 hours, and navigate over the world's most rugged terrain. They are

?piloted? back home by young people reared on video games. In the morning, they take their children to school and report to the office in Nevada. All day long they check the monitors, direct drones to targets, and drop their bombs. They're home again by dinner time and getting ready for the evening?s P.T.A. meeting.

Machines set loose to sow death on earth -- a sci-fi film come to life. War has never been so programmed and detached. ?The War of the Worlds,? ?The Terminator? -- mechanized horror has breached the line of fiction.

And when the armchair ?pilots? press the code for launch, the drones release missiles called ?hellfire.? Here drones have breached the line of theology. Hellfire brings to mind the would-be warmaking disciples James and John. They pressed Jesus to heap massive revenge upon the hated enemy, the Samaritans (Luke 9:54). ?Do you want us to call down hellfire from heaven?? they asked hopefully.

Past and future converge. Drones are the future, and the future is here -- machines doing our killing. On the other hand, the story reaches deep into the past. The machines are killing Christ in the form of Iraqi, Pakistani and Afghan children. The violence may be robotic, computerized, antiseptic. But violence it is, and like any species of violence, it runs counter to the peaceable way of the nonviolent Jesus. Violence, in all its forms, sows the seeds of terrorism, poverty and further war. War and terrorism directed at us. Jesus sharply rebuked James and John. He would rebuke us too.

Drones won?t put an end to the Taliban; the drones? very inhumanity will turn a population against us. The people there will look up in astonishment, not at American know-how but at American hubris, and they?ll join the Taliban in droves. They?ll set their burning hearts on one thing: retaliation. And violence will take another turn downward toward the abyss.

For us, of course, the temptation is that these things kill and we keep our hands clean. Someone presses a button, the shuddering machines take to the air. Should civilians die, we lament the collateral damage, but in our hearts we hold to the delusion -- we didn?t do the killing. We pass into passive sentences: ?Non-combatants were killed.? That?s all. This is warmaking free of guilt, involving no one, really; no one is responsible. The ideal dodge for the church-going, flag-waving, Christian patriot.

?We are gravely concerned at the implications that these drones may have for the future of our military's interventions,? the Nevada Desert Experience, the local peace group, wrote last fall.

The lesser the sacrifices that we are required to make to engage in warfare, the easier it will be to justify war and the more likely it will become.... This increase in military activity is deeply disturbing to those of us who understand that our foreign military interventions increase imperialistic hegemony and threaten the prospects of a global democracy.

I submit that the drones should be dismantled immediately. They are bad for the economy, bad for our security, bad for the environment, bad for children, bad for our health -- but especially bad for our souls.

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In the drone?s metal we see our reflected selves. The soulless machines reflect our barren souls. They reflect our soulless nation too, itself a machine sowing death on earth. To this extent, the drones are useful: they betray the hard truths about ourselves. We as a people have lost our soul. They show us what

we have become.

Last month, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and I concocted a plan to meet face to face with the new president and ask him point blank to stop U.S. warmaking in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I had many responses from the White House, and was told the meeting would likely occur, but then suddenly, I was told there would be no meeting.

So this week we read the account of the civil disobedience, arrest and execution of the nonviolent Jesus. It's a story playing out around the world among the suffering and the poor. And we are invited to enter the story -- to take up Jesus' campaign of revolutionary nonviolence in resistance to empire. The story summons us to do what we can, to march on our own Jerusalems, to demand the end of the Pentagon, Los Alamos, Livermore Labs, our local death row -- every place preparing for brimstone and hellfire.

We are summoned, too, to practice universal love, a love that reaches out with food, medicine and aid to our sisters and brothers in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. We are called to become people of nonviolence and pursue God's reign of peace, a world without war, weapons or violence. In this we reclaim our souls.

So my friends and I go to Creech Air Force Base because Jesus went to Jerusalem. We want to carry on his campaign of nonviolence, however small and modest our gesture. We will say No to this latest, state-of-the-art version of death. We will sit down in protest and stand up for peace. We will shine the light of truth on this dark corner. As we face arrest for our humble act, we pray for the abolition of war and the coming of God's reign of peace on earth.

In the process, we will, no doubt, get a foretaste of Easter, and receive the risen Christ's gift of peace. And that is the point: we want to be ready for resurrection, that new life of nonviolence which has nothing more to do with death.

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St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published, John Dear On Peace: An Introduction to His Life and Work by Patricia Normile. John also has two new books, A Persistent Peace (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and Put Down Your Sword, (Eerdmans) a collection of essays on nonviolence, all available from www.amazon.com. For info on the Good Friday protest in Nevada, see: www.nevadadesertexperience.org. On April 24-26, John will lead a weekend retreat on the lives and lessons of Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton at the Kirkridge retreat center, see: www.kirkridge.org. For info on his books and speaking schedule, see: www.johndear.org.

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