

Sunday next before Lent, Year C

Exodus 34.29-35 • Psalm 99 • 2 Cor 3.12-4.2 • Luke 9.28-36[37-43a]

St Luke's, Chelsea

27 February 2022

Sam Hole

How are we to respond to the horrors we see unfolding in Ukraine?

We have seen the pictures of people fleeing the country, or sheltering in the underground stations. We have watched Ukrainian leaders make speeches rallying their country to defend itself, and have seen the condemnations of Western politicians. But for all the fighting talk, we fear that the question of initial Russian victory is one of when, not if.

And what is taking place there as we speak is deeply upsetting. For those of us here today with longer memories, it is a reminder of similar past moments of violence and warfare, events that we have been grateful not to see for many decades. And if we can ever speak meaningfully of evil; of wickedness; of immorality – it is surely here, as we helplessly watch the actions of Vladimir Putin and his followers.

So, how are we to respond? We could certainly another time ponder what response, politically and militarily, we as Christians might seek to offer. But today I want to consider, quite simply, the question of how, in response to all that is happening in Ukraine, we can pray. And following the theologian Sam Wells, I want to suggest three ways we can pray; three ways to respond in prayer to this heartbreaking situation.¹

The first way we can pray is what we might call the prayer of resurrection. It is a call for a miracle. 'God', we might pray, 'by the power with which Jesus conquered the forces of death, save Ukraine. Push back the Russian invasion. Change the mind of Vladimir Putin. Help Ukraine to win its fight to be a free and democratic nation.' There is good reason to pray this prayer. It comes out of compassion for our fellow humans facing a horrifying loss of freedom. It is an expression of our deepest longing for the situation. And it is indeed the prayer on which Christianity is founded. It is the prayer of the Israelites escaping Egypt, or exile in Babylon; the prayer of Peter and Paul as they faced persecution for their faith in Christ. It is right that these are the first words to flow from our lips. ... But even as we pray this prayer of resurrection,

¹ See Sam Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*, pp.293-5

we also have in mind the ways in which we do not see justice done in this world. We remember the dictators who have oppressed their people and died peacefully in their beds; the wealthy who profit at the expense of the poor. We are bound as Christians to hope that salvation will happen, that justice will one day come. But we are all too aware that this may not take place in this world, or that it may come now in a way we do not perceive. We cry out for resurrection for Ukraine, but know that this may not happen quite as we long for.

This prayer of resurrection is worth praying. But it is not the only kind of prayer. A second prayer we might pray is what we might call the prayer of incarnation. It is a call for the Holy Spirit to be with the Ukrainian people. It is a recognition that life can be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.² And it is also a recognition that this suffering is part of the life that Jesus lived, not least as he died broken, desolate, alone on the cross. So the prayer of incarnation might say: 'God, in Jesus you took on human form. You knew our weakness. Be alongside the people of Ukraine now: give them patience to endure what lies ahead, hope to get through every trying day, and allies to help them know that their suffering is not forgotten.'

Again, there is good reason to pray this prayer. It looks honestly and unflinchingly at the trauma of the present. It takes on Jesus's promise that the Holy Spirit will come to comfort us. What's more, if the prayer of resurrection asks God to do the work, this prayer of incarnation reminds us that we also are to be God's hands in the world. We pray for allies for Ukraine, asking that their situation would not be forgotten. And this reminds us that we are to be those allies – perhaps in offering physical support, or in ensuring the British government does not reduce its pressure on Russia to remove its troops. The prayer of incarnation is, indeed, also a good prayer to pray.

But there is, I want to suggest, a third kind of prayer we might offer for Ukraine. In today's gospel Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James and John. The disciples see Jesus's changed appearance; they hear the voice of God. They are taken further into the mystery that Christ is the Son of God, living the life of God on earth. The disciples learn that there is a whole glorious reality going on that is caught up with the everyday life that they experience, but about which they are entirely unaware and ignorant.

Today we might, in addition to the prayer of resurrection and the prayer of incarnation, pray a prayer of transfiguration. It might go like this: 'God, in the

² To quote Hobbes.

transfiguration of Jesus we see a whole reality within and beneath and beyond what we thought we understood. In their times of suffering and confusion, show the people of Ukraine and us your glory, that we may find a deeper truth to our life than we ever imagined, come closer together than we'd ever thought possible, and know your grace like never before.'

Like the others, this prayer is not the only one we might pray. We can still yearn for God to deal with the situation. We can pray for God to be with the Ukrainians who suffer. But we can also pray that in the troubles of Ukraine the eyes of all people are opened to see the life of God in the world. Perhaps we will revisit with new eyes the question asked of Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan: 'who is my brother?'. Maybe in the face of Putin's aggression we may become more sensitive to the working of evil in the world, and to the meaning of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection for today. Perhaps against the backdrop of evil our eyes will become more attuned to the good, the fruit of the Spirit, still to be seen in the world. This is the prayer of transfiguration. We ask for we, and all people, that we would have the eyes to see this world as it really is. We ask to see God.

And this prayer of transfiguration, to see God, is surely one of our desires each Lent. For in Lent we seek to strip away the things that keep a veil between us and God; the things that prevent our faces from shining like Moses'. We seek to gaze more truly on the divine realities of this world, and so to be transformed.

But, this Lent, we have all too apparent a desperate reminder of the evil that, as the events of Holy Week remind us, has infected the world. And we may respond to today's evil in many ways. Among them, we may pray. We may pray for a miracle for Ukraine; we may pray for the Ukrainians to know God with them today; we may pray that the eyes of all people are opened to see the true glory of God. But, most fervently, we pray for peace. For a laying down of weapons; a return to Ukrainian freedom; for the Ukrainian people. At the end of each service we pray that we will know the peace of God, which passes all understanding; today, we may silently add, may God's peace be also in the hearts and minds of the people of Ukraine, today and in the days to come.