Sermon – Sunday Before Lent – Ukraine

It’s hard to know where to begin this morning. Our fears have been realised and Europe is once more at war. This is no regional conflict like the Balkans in the 1990s, but a war that engulfs us all for it is, essentially, not about nationality, but about values. It takes me further back to the Cold War tension of the 1980s, cruise missiles, Greenham Common and even that quite dreadful nuclear attack leaflet delivered to every home in the country in 1980: *Protect and Survive.*

In the face of the terrors that fill our papers and screens and the even more fearful terrors of our imaginations, we feel powerless. There is nothing we can do. There is nothing we can do to directly help Ukraine – at least until a humanitarian response is possible – and there is nothing we can do to affect Europe’s response. This is largely paralysed in the UK by the political decision to host Oligarch finance in London and in the EU by the decision to purchase almost half its gas supplies from Russia. The gap between rhetoric and response in the West simply adds to the terror that Ukrainians face.

Such a fatalistic, passive outlook may be true for most, but it should not be true for people of faith. Partly because faith values are under attack in a war like this, but mainly because our faith speaks of peace in the strongest and most robust way.

Peace is life giving; it is the foundation of human fulfilment; it is the building block of harmony for the whole of creation. Be careful not to confuse peace with freedom for freedom as a Christian construct is quite different to freedom or democracy as a political construct. Christian freedom is rooted in submission to Christ, not reliance upon governmental permission to do this or that. Your freedom comes from your faith not from political decree.

So, whilst we feel powerless, as Christians there are things we can and should do.

First, we need to place prayer at the heart of our daily lives. This is why from tomorrow I am keen that our churches are open daily for prayer for anyone who wishes to come into this sacred space. We will need to remove one or two things from the church as they will be unattended though there is little here of any financial value and the value of being open is far, far greater. There is a rota sheet at the back of church for anyone able to help open or close the church; in pairs please, if you can.

We will also begin to say Morning and Evening Prayer daily in church upon opening and 20 minutes before closing. Again, volunteer if you can. It is some years since that has been practised in either church and again it will bring spiritual benefits to our community. Richard and I will ensure it takes place.

Secondly, please keep informed about the war. It is so awful that it is tempting, understandable, to turn away and not pay attention. But our prayers need to be informed. Pray for the people you see on the screen and if you can name them in your prayers, do. Ukraine is 1600 miles away; it feels remote; it feels like a different world; the language and culture are so different to our own; yet Ukrainians and Russians are all children of God, just as we are, and they need our love. In war there are no victors.

Jesus said: ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14.27)

Christ’s peace is rooted in the peace of the Cross, the peace of unconditional love. It is a peace that is as universal as it is unlimited. It is a peace that is freely offered, at enormous cost. It is a peace that is discovered only through absolute sacrifice.

Lent will be even more poignant for us than usual this year as we explore once again the nature of Jesus’ sacrifice and the sacrifice we are invited to enter into also if we are to truly follow him. 1600 miles away thousands of Ukrainians are discovering that there is no peace without sacrifice, and that personal sacrifice is nothing compared with the universal good.

Yet, we do well to remember that Christ’s peace is unlike any that the world can give or that we can forge for ourselves. Our hearts are troubled today; we may, at times, be fearful of the future, not only for Ukraine, but for ourselves too.

Christ’s peace can help us through all this, if we are willing to truly throw our burdens upon the Lord. In this service we routinely hear the Comfortable Words that begin:

*Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him.*

Those words have been part of our liturgy since 1549 and I hope they provide comfort for you today. God loves the world so much, that he gave us Jesus. We love God and God’s world so much, that we desire to follow him.

As we enter Lent may we pray for peace, but may we also live Christ’s peace by being peace-makers amongst ourselves, our families, friends and community. May we be witnesses to the eternal love of God that is so much more powerful than any mortal army, and through our prayers bring the Holy Spirit to bear upon a most troubled world.

Amen.