

## **Reflection by Rev David Ford for Taizé Service on Zoom at 4.00 pm on 6 March 2022**

Our minds have been awash with images and fears these past ten days as we have listened and watched the horrors unfold 1600 miles – that's just three hours flight time – away in Ukraine.

There's lots of ways of processing what's going on.

Not all of us have the resilience or strength to pay any attention to the detail. Horrors in our own lives can easily be re-ignited by witnessing the suffering of others. So, we might step back from it all, pray, but otherwise focus on our ordinary lives. After all, we consider ourselves pretty powerless about it all.

We can, of course, engage politically to sustain pressure on sanctions and the welcoming of refugees. And we can now give money and find ways of donating urgently needed goods for shipping to Poland and elsewhere.

But as Christians, we are all theologians, though we may not feel especially capable in that regard. Despite such reticence and self-doubt we have a responsibility to see these events in theological terms, in the light of the gospel and the doctrines of our faith; in the light of our understanding of sin and redemption, in the light of our understanding of God, Jesus and the cross. I can't think of a better season in the church's year than Lent to engage in this way.

These brief reflections are nothing more than the product of a pen unleashed for an hour on a Saturday morning so they are neither comprehensive nor conclusive in terms of my own thinking, leave alone anyone else's.

My first observation is that we are witnessing evil on a grand scale. We cannot know at this stage whether the scale of this is greater than anything else we've witnessed in our lifetimes, for, after all, a lot of evil in the world does not impact us and so we rarely know much about it. Syria is one example. Ukraine is close to home and because it involves democratic Europeans it feels like it is us that are being targeted. Such thinking is sinful of course, for all are equal in the sight of God, but at least we're honest when we recognise that violence to people like us, certainly wins over our attention.

This war is pure evil. We must name it as such not simply to eradicate any notion of justification, historic precedent or understanding, but because evil is beyond the reach of human redemption. The only way evil can be rebutted is either through more evil – though arguably morally justifiable such as the horrible Allied bombing in the second world war – or through divine redemption which we call love, the divine love that we name as God.

Thankfully, and we have God to thank, there is more love in the world than evil; indeed, the short-sightedness of the purveyors of evil is that they forget that the more and more acts of evil they deploy, the greater the manifestation of love that is generated. Putin is deploying terrible, terrible evil upon the world, but his evil acts are generating unheard of levels of love across the world too. Therein lies our hope. To believe in this kind of thinking requires a

great deal of faith and a willingness not to see good outcomes in our lifetimes – but then, as Christians, we are pretty accustomed to having to wait.

Evil is, of course, sinful. But sin is never solely an individual shortcoming; sin in the Christian tradition is always collective too. We can and should blame Putin and hold him to account, but if the Christian critique of sin in the context of the Ukraine crisis stops there, we are ignoring our catholic understanding of the nature of sin, the universal achievement of Christ on the cross and our responsibility as Christ's advocates on earth today.

The universality of the gospel is key here. The unconditional love of God represented by Christ on the cross is for the whole world without discrimination. God doesn't love you any more because your sins are relatively minor. God loves Vladimir Putin just as much as he loves any of us.

Now here is the crucial bit.

If we truly believe that love knows no bounds or limitations, we must accept responsibility for all the evil in the world, as well as lay claim for God, for all the love in the world.

For unless we own the world's sins for God, and absorb them into our being, into our very selves, God's love cannot permeate beyond us and transform the evil that is in our midst.

This, for me, is the weakness of traditional protestant theology that emphasises personal, not collective, salvation, and has intellectualised the entire enterprise.

Faith in practice is very simple. Seek out sin; own it for Christ; allow the loving Godliness of your soul to transform it.

Every time evil is present, we must, as Christians, rush in, accept responsibility for it on God's behalf, and love it into oblivion.

To put this in really bald terms, what use to me is heaven, unless those who have so sorely offended me, are not there too?

It is not always easy to see much difference between the condemnations of religious leaders and the condemnations of our political masters. Yet the differences are enormous.

No end of rhetoric will heal Ukraine; no end of strengthening NATO will prevent atrocities; no end of sanctions will make the remotest bit of difference to the suffering; no outpouring of humanitarian aid and goodwill can assure us that there will be no repetition.

What will work, what only can work, is the love of God; the yeast that is in you. But first, we must make the sin our own, so that God's love can reach it.

So, allow these dreadful events to reach your heart, for that is where the transformation begins. Take an interest, be engaged, allow yourselves to hurt and to cry. For then, and only then, the work of God's holy spirit has begun.

Finally, pray for Vladimir Putin and all those around him. He too is a child of God, needing to be loved. Amen.