

Sunday 20 March, 2022

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Emeritus Chris Carolane, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Third Sunday of Lent, 2022.

Readings: [Psalm 46](#), [Psalm 23](#), [John 11:17-36](#)

Our New Testament reading this afternoon is part of the account of Jesus going to Bethany with his disciples to the funeral of his good friend Lazarus. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha were probably well known in Bethany. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days. His home was full of mourners. His sisters and friends were deep in grief and sorrow.

Mary said to Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. (John 11:32-35)

Greatly disturbed and deeply moved, Jesus wept.

The only other occasion that the Bible records Jesus weeping is in Luke's gospel as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey at the start of his last week prior to his crucifixion. Luke writes: "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." (Luke 19:41-42)

My brothers and sisters, today Jesus weeps again for all people who cannot recognize the things that make for peace. Jesus weeps for all people who mourn and are in grief and sorrow. He

weeps for innocent people who are being attacked, killed, abused, maimed, enslaved, or kept unjustly in detention by governments and other people in power.

Today, Jesus weeps for Ukraine and the peace that has been lost there. He weeps for the innocent children, babies, mothers, and fathers who have been killed or injured at the hands of a wicked foreign power. Jesus weeps for the elderly of Ukraine, he weeps for Ukrainian soldiers and other Ukrainians who are defending their people and their land.

Jesus weeps for Ukrainian doctors and nurses, police, ambulance and other special workers, and people in authority who struggle each day to help the helpless, the homeless, the sick and injured, the dispossessed and the refugees. Jesus' heart breaks with the broken hearts of the Ukrainian people, his heart burns at the injustice and sin that is being inflicted by men and women whom, like the Ukrainian people themselves and like you and me and like every human being are people made in God's image. But these aggressors have allowed themselves to be overcome by sin. They are led by a sinful, wicked leader and his sinful, wicked government. Their actions are pure evil.

As a result, the world is witnessing horror, destruction, murder, war crimes and above all, people's inhumanity to people. My friends, make no mistake. This is not God's will! Nor is it God's doing! No! This is the action of evil people who have a lust for power and seem to give no value to human life and livelihoods.

In our saviour Christ, we have a God who understands human weakness and human sorrow. In Him, we have a saviour and God who embraces our sorrow, our distress and our anger at the injustices that are being done illegally, immorally, and despicably by this foreign power. Jesus weeps as we weep.

The prophet Isaiah wrote of the Messiah:

3 He was despised and rejected by others; a man of sorrows and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

4 Surely, he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3-5)

As Christian people, we know in our hearts that this is true, but how do we find solace in the face of such terrible sorrow as we are experiencing in the present situation in Ukraine? What can we do to help those in Ukraine who now are in so much need? Where is helping to be found when we and much of the world are so impotent?

I believe that answer is found in the words of Psalm 46 which was our first reading this afternoon.

God is our refuge and strength: a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be moved: and though the mountains are shaken in the midst of the sea; though the waters rage and foam and though the mountains quake at the rising of the sea. (Ps 46:1 – 3)

It is at times such as this, when we cannot see a way forward out of the terror in which we find ourselves that we must turn to God for refuge and comfort. We must look to that city of God, the holy dwelling-place of the Most High of which the psalmist writes.

Why?

The psalmist proclaims it in verse 5:

God is in the midst of this city and therefore she shall not be moved: God will help her at the break of day. (Ps 46:5)

He goes on to proclaim:

The nations make uproar, and the kingdoms are shaken: but God has lifted his voice, and the earth shall tremble.

The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our stronghold. (Ps 46:6 – 7)

The psalmist continues by calling us to come and see what the Lord has done. He writes that God will make wars to cease in all the world. He will break the bow and shatter the spear. He burns the chariots in the fire. And so, God says to us all:

“Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted upon the earth.”

The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our stronghold. (Ps 46:10 - 11)

God has not left the Ukrainian people. God is with them, walking alongside each of them as they struggle and look for peace and calm. As the 23rd Psalm proclaims “yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me.” (Ps. 23:4)

I do not pretend for one moment that to live in a theatre of war is not horrific. I do not pretend for one moment that the grief and sorrow of the Ukrainian people are not real, for they most certainly are. I do not pretend for a moment that living in the midst of such anguish is easy. It most definitely is not. But what I do know, and what I cling to, is the truth that God is with us in such dark times. God is with Ukraine, just as God was with the Lord Jesus in his darkest hour when he was illegally, immorally, and cruelly attacked by wicked people acting in the name of a wicked foreign power, and they hung him on a cross to die. In that, his darkest hour, Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

I believe he cried out like that because that is how he felt at that cruel moment. But the truth is that God had not forsaken Jesus, even though that is how he felt at that moment. And at his last, Jesus was able to say: “Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

God dramatically demonstrated that he had not left Jesus forsaken, because he mightily raised him from death to new life. Jesus' words to Martha at Lazarus's funeral were physically and mightily fulfilled:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

In their darkest hour, God has not forsaken the Ukrainian people. God is with them, walking with them, loving them, weeping with them, holding them to himself.

As Christian brothers and sisters, we must do whatever we can to love them and support them at this time. We must be constant and fervent in prayer for Ukraine. Those of us who are fiscally able should give money to assist those who are in distress. We must speak out against the evil that is being committed and we must urge our government to do everything it can to bring about peace and to support Ukrainian people who seek refuge and shelter here in Australia. Most fundamentally, we must affirm and proclaim: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

Amen