

Sunday 27 February, 2022

Sermon given by the Revd Canon Dr Stephen Ames, Canon Emeritus, on the Eighth Sunday after Epiphany

Russia, Ukraine and the rest of us

Like everyone else I am shaken by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

After all the back and forwards between Russia and Western leaders looking for a diplomatic way forward, we have a war in Europe between two nations sharing the same form of Christianity.

Last week, Russia conducted a strategic nuclear weapons exercise, practising dropping weapons of mass destruction on civilians with intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine launched missiles and bombers.

We have Mr Putin's thinly veiled threat to use nuclear weapons in response to anyone trying to stand in Russia's way. Also, Belarus' referendum on Sunday to revoke its nuclear-weapon-free pledge in its constitution adds fuel to the fire in an already tense time.

Mr Biden condemns Putin for choosing war. Mr Johnson said Putin has blood on his hands. Our PM described Putin as conducting a brutal invasion. .

ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, Australia, condemns Mr. Putin for breaking international law by this completely unjustified invasion, and for the terror visited on civilians in the Ukraine and on Ukrainians and all around the world.

Australia stands with the people of Ukraine and their president who will stay and face the Russian army. We are mindful of the suffering of civilians whether staying or fleeing. And we pray for the end of the war.

We are also mindful of the Russian people who do not want President Putin's war on Ukraine. These things must be said.

Meanwhile, we gather for worship to hear the scriptures read and expounded and receive the sacrament, all to help us live another day, another week before God.

What do the scriptures set for today offer us?

The Gospel reading begins,

If a blind person guides a blind person, will they not both fall into a pit?

Are we not on the verge of falling into a pit? Are we all blind? Even the leaders on all sides? Is there something we have not seen? The next verse of the Gospel gives an answer.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye and cannot see the log in your own eye?

If we apply this word to ourselves, is there is something about us that we cannot see? Yes, what Jesus calls the log in our own eye.

Do we have a blind spot we cannot see?

Going on the public statements of our leaders' condemnation of Putin's invasion I hear no acknowledgement of us as invaders. We invaded Iraq without a UN resolution. Are we willing to describe ourselves in the same terms that we describe Putin?

Not everyone in Australia believed the claims about Weapons of Mass Destruction, and they have never been found. Did we just make a 'mistake'? Are we willing to describe Putin as having made a 'mistake'?

No, the West speaks as if from the high ground as if it were not an aggressive invader. Is this not the log that is in our own eye?

With the log in the eye how easy it is for one side to see itself as good as reasonable, and the other side as irrational and evil.

Invasion is a great evil and Putin is rightly condemned for invading Ukraine. So too the US, the UK and Australia stands condemned by their own words for invading Iraq without any UN resolution and at such terrible cost to the Iraqi people, the land, and the combatants? There is a log in our eye, that distorts our self-presentation to the world.

Jesus continues, no good tree bears bad fruit, and no bad tree bears good fruit. Each tree is known by its fruit. A good person out of the good treasures of the hear produces good and the bad person out of the bad treasure of the heart produces evil. It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

Jesus' teaching has more to say about the evil that comes out of the heart. You recall he was challenged about his disciples eating with unclean hands. He declared there was no food that going into a person makes them unclean, because it enters not the heart but the stomach and so goes to the sewer. He then went onto say that it is what comes out of a person that defiles for, according to the Greek text, it is from the dialogues of the heart, that evil arises.

So, what are the dialogues of the heart that have been running in Putin? Do we know? Yes, because Putin has told us, in several speeches.

One is the threat to Russia from NATO's expansion east to Russia's border and his calling for a diplomatic solution for years, since annexing Crimea. Putin complains bitterly about the West's refusal to take him seriously.

Another is that Ukraine is not really a nation state and is now just a puppet of the West, infected with neo-Nazis in control.

Yet another is the tragedy of the German invasion of Russia in 1941 and the tragedy of the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. The lesson Mr Putin has taken from these events is that Russia must not adopt a policy of appeasement. It must conduct itself militarily to prevent a greater disaster.

His goal appears to be not just taking over Ukraine but wants to reverse the rules-based order constructed and driven by the United States since the end of the second world war, which Australia strongly supports.

There is a wide variety of reactions to these reflections. One is to dismiss it all as a fantasy for example the neo-Nazis allegedly running Ukraine. Fair enough. But not to distinguish between one's assessment of his speeches and one's assessment of what they mean for Putin would be a mistake. He is an autocrat who suppresses dissent at home, even lethally, who has his hands on great power, technological, economic, political, and military, even nuclear weapons.

I would like help from Australian experts to carefully assess Putin's thinking. What if anything can be taken seriously and what cannot?

Someone may object that this is sounding like a justification of the invasion. Be very clear it is not. We totally oppose Russia's invasion of Ukraine; we support sanctions that have real impact should be applied to Russia *and* we should seek talks with Putin as the President of Ukraine has called for especially in the light the invasion.

You think Putin unhinged, irrational, remember that President Bush was sure that God told him to go into Iraq to establish democracy, and that this was US Destiny from beyond the stars. Not everyone in Australia believed the claims about Weapons of Mass Destruction, and they have never been found.

Putin's speeches might be taken to be grief for a lost empire and the determination to retrieve what was lost. And what phrase would aptly describe what Putin wants? Surely, he wants to make Russia great again. We are very familiar with these words spoken by Mr Trump wanting to make America great again. Seventy million Americans voted for him.

We totally oppose Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sanctions that have real impact should be applied to Russia and we should keep open diplomatic channels with Putin as the President of Ukraine has called for especially in the light the invasion.

We must return to talking to Russia to bring about an end to the war. It will not end by force of arms and do we want a mere armistice as between North and South Korea. Recall the time when we said we would never talk to the Taliban. I think it was Hilary Clinton But we had to talk. So too here with Russia.

But before we return to talks with Russia, we need to recognize we have a log in our eye, indeed more than one. We also need to take stock of the dialogues of the heart that have been running on our side.

The last part of the Gospel reading today is a parable about the difference between doing what Jesus teaches or not. It is the difference between building your house on solid rock or building your house on the ground without any foundation. With the coming of floods and storms, the first house stands, but the second falls and great is its fall.

We have been thinking what building on Jesus' word in today's Gospel from Luke might mean in the context of responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

At present Ukrainian civilians and combat troops are strongly resisting the Russian army, led by their president and commander in chief, Volodymyr Zelensky. No one expects this resistance to beat the Russian army. I pray that President Zelensky will recognize when the cost of this proud and powerful resistance becomes too much. By that I refer to all the beautiful cities of Syria that have been turned to empty broken shells by the Russian air force, in support of President Assad. Let that not be the fate of Ukraine.

Something on the side of all of this happened this week that gives me some hope of a way forward.

Australian senior constable Kelly Foster, who lost her life last year trying to save a Chinese national, was awarded the Gold Great Wall Commemorative Medal by the Chinese ambassador to Australia. It is a start toward the renewal of the relationship between Australia and China. Kyrie Eleison

The Church's prayer for this week acknowledges that whoever lives without love is counted dead before God. We are thinking of what Jesus' teaching has to offer us at this time. His most radical word about love is that we should love our enemies. Whatever that means it surely means we do not provoke them.