

**Friday 15 April 2022**

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on Good Friday 2022*

**Readings:** [Isaiah 52.13–53.12](#), [1 Corinthians 1.18-31](#)

The war in Ukraine has dominated our news. The stories of everyday bravery and chutzpah in the face of a stronger and better resourced opponent have touched us in ways that other conflicts have not. The images of neighbourhoods and livelihoods destroyed and the reports of brutal killing of civilians have deeply shocked us. At the midpoint of Lent, at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne, we prayed with Ukrainian Christians for an end to the war in their homeland. We were joined by Fr Andriy Mykytyuk and members of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Australia. When I spoke to some of the Ukrainian Australians after the service, there was the same sense of resolve and defiance we have seen among the Ukrainian citizens defending their homeland on the frontlines. 'There are three things we can do as Christians', Fr Andriy reminded us, as we lit a candle for peace: 'Pray for an end to the war, work for peace in the world, and tell the truth about the war in Ukraine'. These three actions—prayer and worship, working and advocating, and truth telling—are central to our life of discipleship, and will sustain us in times of conflict.

On Good Friday we follow Jesus on the journey to the cross in real time. In our readings and in our devotions, we come ever closer to the place of our salvation. We hear the prophetic voices foretelling the death of God's anointed. We sing the story of Christ's betrayal and arrest; his trial and passion. As we journey to the cross this day, we are reminded again of the reason for why these events had to take place. For Christians, the cross is not the end of our journeys. Rather it stands at the beginning of our walk with Christ. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: 'The cross is not the terrible end of a happy, pious life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of our community with Jesus Christ'. That insight holds true for all followers of Jesus,

not only those who, like Bonhoeffer, followed Christ in times of adversity. From the moment a person decides to follow Christ's call, they receive the cross: 'the cross is laid on each Christian'. Our own discipleship mirrors Christ's: 'Whenever Christ calls, his call leads us to death', Bonhoeffer put it starkly. When we witness to Christ through our words and actions, we bring Christ to the world; we carry an inestimable gift to others. We witness to the One who carries our cross by carrying one another's burdens. By telling the truth of the suffering and injustices others face, by advocating and fighting on their behalf, and by praying for and with them.

Telling the truth is one of the most powerful things a Christian can do. During the past month, we have seen the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, come together in calling on the Russian Orthodox church to use its prophetic voice to condemn the war in Ukraine. Holding nations accountable for their actions by speaking out and telling the truth, making the state responsible for what it does, is what Christians are called to do in times of conflict. Particularly when there are close links between faith communities and people in power, such as in Russia. Telling the truth, time after time, even against hope, even when we are wearied by the effort, will ultimately win out. Prophetic truth telling is what brought down Apartheid in South Africa and, closer to home and only last week, has led to the release of the remaining refugees detained in our own city. Telling the truth about the sins of the past brought reconciliation in South Africa and, I am hopeful, will also be what leads to greater justice for First Nations people here in Australia.

Working for peace in the world, likewise, is an essential part of Christian discipleship. Commenting on Christian living under the repressive Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer said: 'Where the world despises other members of the Christian family, Christians will love and serve them. If the world does violence to them, Christians will help them and provide them relief'. The outpouring of practical support by the nations neighbouring Ukraine, the unheard-of support of the European Union granting unconditional asylum to millions of people displaced by the war, is one way of showing forth the values of Christian living. If the 'world' feels too big for you, your local community and our government is tangible and knowable. Raising funds for the International Red Cross or community organisations working with refugees by holding morning teas, or advocating for a more generous intake of refugees to Australia, are ways in which each of us can show practical support. Working for peace in the world means writing to our political

representatives and advocating for swifter, more generous action in settling those displaced from war zones. You may never receive an answer back from your MP, but where many express the same concern MPs take note—especially in an election year when voters have a choice. In this way, we work regardless of the many people who seek to make faith irrelevant in modern society, and regardless of the many people, perhaps even a majority, who slumber when others suffer. This is what heroes of our faith like Bonhoeffer did in the 1930s and 1940s, and it is what we are called to do today.

All these actions—telling the truth and working for peace—are underpinned by prayer. Prayer is what unites us with Christ and resources our resolve. Prayer reflects the inward reality of faith to our world. In our prayer and in our worship, as we give thanks today for Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and we ourselves approach the cross, we, too, can help others gain glimpses of this eternal reality. When we live as disciples in this world—by our prayer, by working for peace and by telling the truth to power—Jesus will help us bear our burdens of faith-filled living and sacrificial action in this world. In the same way that Jesus’ disciples witness to his deeds of liberating power, so Jesus will witness to us in the time of our trial and suffering.

Good Friday is not a passive act of remembrance. It is a call to action. Today’s commemoration invites us to shoulder daily the cross that Christ himself bears. In return for this act of bearing the cross, Jesus promises us a community of others and community with himself who both share in the bearing of it. Where we shoulder the cross, we deny our own self-interests and instead join a community of cross-bearers. We share with Jesus and all other disciples in bearing the cross that he himself bore. It is in this shared bearing, that we are enabled to undertake the daily task of self denial in order to follow Christ—truth telling, working for peace and justice, and praying for an end to conflict and terror. This daily taking up of the cross will put us against the interests of the world, may well lead to rejection and conflict. It is in this way that we share in our own lives something of the crucifixion of Christ.

By following Jesus, we assent daily to sharing with him rejection and suffering. We conform daily to the new commandment of love shown forth supremely on the cross: our discipleship places us straight under the cross. This is what celebrating Holy Week and Easter, what faithful discipleship, in time of conflict means: to stand by Christ in his suffering. Stand together by the

members of the body of Christ in their suffering. Dietrich Bonhoeffer assures us that our Easter celebration becomes real when we witness to Christ in this world. Because Jesus will bear witness for us in the world to come: 'Those who have held onto Jesus in this life will find that Jesus will hold onto them in eternity', Bonhoeffer assures us.

Father, as we give thanks for your abundant love  
help us to love you with all our heart:  
enable us to serve you with all our strength,  
and long for you with all our soul.

Father, as we contemplate the suffering of your Son  
help us to recognise Jesus in those around us:  
let us be a neighbour to those who need us,  
and love ourselves and others as you love us.

Father, as we look on Jesus lifted high on the cross  
help us shoulder the cross that you have in store for us,  
help us bear one another's burdens and share another's suffering,  
knowing that we carry the cross with you and our neighbours.

Father, as we see this broken world of suffering and war  
help us to see in your crucified Son the conqueror of death and evil,  
and empower us by your Spirit to witness to your power to save  
by speaking your truth, working for peace and witnessing to your love.  
Amen.