

Reflection and prayers at the service for Ukraine at Sunday@6 on 27th February 2022

Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount

5 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, **2** and he began to teach them.

The Beatitudes

He said:

- 3** “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 4** Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
- 5** Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
- 6** Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
- 7** Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
- 8** Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
- 9** Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
- 10** Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Psalm 133

A song of ascents. Of David.

- 1** How good and pleasant it is
when God’s people live together in unity!
- 2** It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron’s beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
- 3** It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.

For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.

Reflection

The Church of England have made today a special day of prayer for Ukraine, calling on churches to pray for peace.

I didn't really know how to start going about writing this reflection. Like so many others, I've been watching the news of Ukraine with both despair and disbelief. No matter how much we knew that there was a possibility of war, I don't think any of us ever thought it would happen.

But the evidence of war is unfortunately clear. Thousands are fleeing West across Ukraine to safety. There are videos of fathers hugging their children goodbye while they stay behind to fight. Men and women with no military experience are taking up arms to defend their cities. Footage of babies being born in metro stations as you can hear air sirens sound above them.

And then there are the numbers. The UN estimated today that Ukrainian refugee numbers have reached nearly 400,000, with warnings of this number rising to 4 million in future. The Ukrainian Health Minister has talked about hundreds of deaths already, and claims thousands of deaths of Russian soldiers. All this is only a few days into this war.

In the face of such destruction and seemingly senseless cruelty, it is easy to look at the news and to think 'where has the humanity gone?'

But the actions of millions of Ukrainians have been living proof of humanity and that is what I want us to focus on this evening. In the face of an invasion, the people of Ukraine have shown courage, resilience and tenacity. Most importantly they have shown humanity.

Alongside news of violence and deaths, there has been news of hope. There has been footage of elderly Ukrainians standing in front of soldiers and kneeling in front of tanks. There are thousands of people volunteering to join the fight for their country, from computer programmers to actors to business owners to students, all normal people. While in a queue to collect her weapon, one volunteer said about the Russian invasion,

“When I heard the explosions, I decided that I am ready. I am an adult woman, I am healthy and it is my responsibility”. She said it like it was that simple and obvious.

Others are organising communities to aid their military and keep each other safe. People are bringing bed rests and blankets, medical supplies, food and fuel. There have been strangers taking care of children that are not their own so they can safely reach their parents in neighbouring countries. Just before this service, I watched a video of Christian worshipping and singing together in a bomb shelter.

And this show of humanity has even extended to Russian soldiers. Yesterday Ukraine’s Defence Ministry announced a special hotline called "Return alive from Ukraine" for the families of killed or captured Russian soldiers, allowing families to leave messages for their husbands or sons. This hotline has already seen hundreds of calls.

The bravery of President Zelensky to refuse asylum from the USA and remain with his people in Ukraine has given us a true 21st century leader: steadfast, resolute, brave. When rumours spread that he had ordered the army to put down arms and fled himself, Zelensky released a video showing him in the middle of Kyiv, the capital. In this he said,

“I’m here. We won’t put down weapons, we’ll protect our country, because our weapons are our truth and our land, our country, our children and we will defend it all.”

In a world with too much politicking and empty rhetoric, the people of Ukraine’s actions have spoken louder than words ever could. They are a call to the common humanity in all of us.

It is this common humanity that we are called as Christians to recognise and to honour. As we heard in Psalm 133: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”

Unity between all of us is blessed by God. In the Psalm, this unity is described “like the precious oil poured on the head”, telling us that by coming together and turning away from division, we are anointed. As oil is used to bless, so unity is used to consecrate our human relationships with one another. War is the ultimate division, and against all that is sacred. Peace is holy. Peace is anointed.

So, this evening when we look to pray for Ukraine, we pray for unity. We pray for those who are divided from their family to be reunited one day. We pray that as propaganda and misinformation is spread, that the message of common humanity would triumph. We pray that world leaders would join together in their support of Ukraine and ultimately of freedom and independence. We pray for peace between neighbours.

Now I will read a prayer for crisis in Ukraine.

Father God, King of all nations, we cry out to you now for the people of Ukraine. We ask you to rescue those who are vulnerable from the hands of their enemies that they may live without fear before you all their days [Luke 1:74-75].

Lord of lords and Prince of peace, our politicians are predicting the biggest war in Europe since 1945, and we simply cry out to you urgently to write another story in our time. Thwart the dark machinations of evil men. Give wisdom beyond human wisdom to peacemakers seeking an equitable and less violent way. May politicians exercise the wisdom from above, which is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, and full of mercy [James 3:17].

Holy Spirit, we pray for the church in Ukraine, a nation in which 70% of the population call themselves Christian. Give our many brothers and sisters in that nation courage in this crisis that they may proclaim the good news of your kingdom, bind up broken hearts, and bring comfort to all who mourn. [Isaiah 61:1-2].

You Lord, make wars cease to the end of the earth; you break bows, shatter spears, and burn shields with fire [Psalm 46:9]. And so we ask you now to save the lives of many people in Ukraine. Make a peace that is strong and not weak. De-escalate this crisis. We hear of wars and rumours of wars (Matt. 24:6), but you Lord are our rock, our fortress and our deliverer. Our hope is in you. And so we address the nations now. In the name of Jesus we say: "Be still and know God! He is exalted among the nations; he shall be exalted in the earth [Psalm 46:10].

Amen

Intercessions

Lord we pray for the people of Ukraine in this time. We pray that they may find their refuge in You Lord, that You would draw close to them. We pray that they would know that you walk alongside them, that you hear their prayers, that you feel their suffering. Father, would solace be found in You.

We pray for those who are displaced, those who are forced to leave their homes and flee across neighbouring borders. As thousands make dangerous journeys, we pray that they would have safe passage. We know that refugees are open to abuse and exploitation and we pray against this. Father, would those seeking safety find it.

We pray for the Ukrainians who are fighting for their country. We pray for those soldiers who are risking their lives to protect Ukraine. We pray for those who are civilians and are now defending their country untrained. We pray for those citizens who are supporting the defence of their country in whatever way they can.

We pray for Ukraine's leadership, especially President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. An international inspiration, Zelenskyy is a man who has led by example, who refuses asylum to remain with his people, who has shown leadership when it is needed most. Father, we pray your protection over him, his family and all other political leaders in Ukraine.

We pray for the Russian people, both in Russia and abroad, who have had no say in the waging of war. We pray that decisions made by elites would not be reflected on their people. We pray that more hearts would be moved in Russia to stand against war and the oppression of neighbours.

We pray especially for the thousands of Russians who have been arrested for protesting. Father, we acknowledge the bravery of the many who have spoken and are speaking truth to power despite the personal risk of doing

so. We give praise for those who are willing to sacrifice their own safety to advocate for the safety of others.

We pray for those who are sent to wage war because of the plans of others. We pray especially for those young soldiers, Ukrainian and Russian, whose place should not be in battle. We pray for the parents and communities who fear that they may not see their children again.

We pray for civil society organisations that are working to support refugees and civilians. We pray for Caritas Ukraine, the UNHCR Refugee Agency and the Red Cross. We pray for national and local organisations that are trying to meet the needs of those where they work, including Razom for Ukraine and United Help Ukraine. We pray for all those engaged in this much needed humanitarian work.

We pray for media organisations in Ukraine that continue to report news and inform the public. We pray especially for the Kyiv Independent as it continues to report the facts from the ground in the capital and fight misinformation. As they face cyberattacks, bombings and ground invasions, we pray that journalists would be protected as they do the important work of sharing information.

We pray for the international community and world leaders. Lord, would You move the hearts of those in power to take firm action against the invasion of Ukraine. Holy Father, would this time be a wake up call for the international community to work together to protect freedom, democracy and human rights. Let the drive for justice and peace be at the heart of decision making.

Holy Father, you are a God that loves all His children and wishes to see us united, not divided. You have created us in your image, so that we may recognise the divinity that joins us together. We are bound to one another in our common humanity, our common value. Holy Father, we pray for a

world in which this common humanity is treasured, in which all are seen as friends and neighbours, rather than enemies, in which we see brothers and sisters in strangers. Father, let your peace, your unity, your freedom reign.