

Sunday 13th March 2022
Lent 2 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18
NT: Philippians 3.17-4.1
G: Luke 13.31-35

Safety and security are amongst our primary human needs and expectation, and when we see safety and security challenged in others there is a natural human response to call out injustice. As we watch the events in Ukraine, it is the horror of the destruction of that safety and security which speaks to people. Many rightly challenge why the west has not been as vocal in its condemnation of other acts of military aggression over the years, but of course the simple reason is that the pictures of Ukraine show the dismantling of a way of life which feels very familiar to people in western Europe. However unjust it may feel when you consider all those places overwhelmed by violence and warfare in the world, this makes more impact when you see on your screen pictures which could equally be taken outside your own front door, or when you walk into your own street and can imagine a tank heading towards a barricade.

As we begin Lent, our Sunday Gospel readings have been picking up the theme of safety and security. Last week we heard the story of the temptation of Jesus. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you.’” The devil appeals to the basic desire for safety and security. And in today’s Gospel Jesus speaks to the Pharisees, saying, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Again, that sense of safety and security underlies the theme here: the desire of the would-be protector appealing to the sense of need which we all share.

Underlying this is a question about what security and safety means. A troubling theme of Christianity across the centuries is the idea that it doesn't really matter if you are suffering in this life because it will all be better in eternal life. This is a familiar trope in the New Testament, and in fact if you think of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke then you see that this argument is even used as a way of achieving justice for those suffering in the world. We see this in our second reading today when Paul writes, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory." I am never satisfied by this repeating theme, because it seems to me that Christianity must have something more hopeful to say to those experiencing violence, oppression and poverty now. Remember those lines from the prayer with which we are most familiar: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and "Deliver us from evil". You can play with the text and the translation and suggest alternative interpretations, but the likelihood is that the intention behind most utterances of that prayer are about delivering us from evil *now*, and not at some point in the future.

What we all experience, and I think what we are experiencing when we look at reports from Ukraine, is a sense of complete helplessness. We want to reach out to help; we want world powers to respond in a particular way, although we are also aware of potential consequences of that. When we look to the Church we do not always get assistance out of our helplessness. The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church said, quite bizarrely, on Tuesday that a primary cause of the war in Ukraine was their willingness to hold Gay Pride parades. This was surprisingly mad, even for a religious leader, and whilst we should obviously dismiss his words, we are still left asking what safety and security our faith can

offer.

I think that at the heart of our faith must be a more sophisticated understanding of who we are and what we can achieve. Faith becomes self-reflexive because it helps us interpret ourselves. The images of war – or for that matter the experience we have every day of challenge and injustice around us – move our compassion, but faith helps us to move from sentimentalism to realism. The incredibly generous donation which Liverpool Parish Church was able to send off to the Ukraine appeal last week was not, I think, about sentiment, but about practical application because our faith called us to do it. The imperative of shared humanity and an imperative for intervention which Christianity demands is the realistic outworking of faith. That is not to say that those without explicit Christian faith cannot be similarly motivated, but in our belief in a universal relationship with God, we would still associate the non-Christian's motivation for intervention as a reflection of an unconfessed understanding of God in Jesus Christ.

Christian faith does also give us a more nuanced understanding of safety and security. We need to move beyond the rather evangelical idea that if you pray hard enough then you will be rewarded with success. This is rationally and theologically illiterate. However, there can be no doubt that an understanding of oneself as made in the image of God and not limited in our existence by the parameters of death does take away the fear of not being alive. It does not take away the fear of dying and it does not take away the trauma and anxiety of victimhood, but it does embolden us, knowing that resurrection was a gift made to all of us, and not just experienced by one man.

For those who would like to attest to an interventionalist God who will sweep down into

the world and solve its problems, then I think we know that this is not a true understanding of God. I would, though, say that we can speak of an interventionist God, evidenced in two instances. Firstly, God's intervention in the world in the person of Jesus Christ: an incarnational intervention to which our Christmas celebrations hardly do justice. And secondly God's intervention in the world through his creation, through you. If you are open to his love and his presence then the actions which speak that love to the world are God's actions. We should beware of our own arrogance, though. We do not decide what God's actions should be (and Patriarch Kyrill of Russia has clearly decided already), but his actions can only be those which demonstrate his love.

Do you feel safe and secure? It is easy to answer yes when we look at millions fleeing their homes and facing an unknown and uncertain future. But there are people all around us who do not feel safe and secure in their own lives, perhaps for their personal safety, or because food, fuel and utility prices are threatening their financial security. Safety and security are fickle friends and they can disappear without much warning. Our faith helps us to understand our own safety and security and makes us see safety and security as relative rather than absolute.

We do not know what is coming next in Ukraine, or indeed for the potential of another European war, but I hope that we shall be on our front foot as people of faith and a community of faith. More will be asked of us in the coming weeks and months and we pray for God's intervention as we equip ourselves to demonstrate his intervention.

Fr Crispin Pailing