# SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY BEFORE LENT | 27.02.22

# Exodus 34: 29-end; 2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4: 2; St Luke 9: 28-36

# We are all living with disappointment this morning. This time last week we were doing our best to believe the statements coming out of Moscow that Russian troops had no intention of invading the Ukraine. We wanted to believe what we heard, despite the growing unease as we saw Putin’s forces gathering in Byelorussia and in the Crimea as well as on the eastern front. In the UN Assembly on Thursday, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres made a last-ditch plea for the invasion orders to be countermanded: *I have only one thing to say from the bottom of my heart. President Putin, stop your troops from attacking Ukraine. Give peace a chance. Too many people have already died.* But it was already too late and the people of Kyiv and the Ukraine are currently fighting for their lives.

# My sense of disappointment – utterly trivial in the face of all we have seen on our TV screens - is that we don’t have Fr Jim with us today for the *‘Time to Dream’* open consultation session, first announced before Christmas. But as you know, all British Airways short-haul flights were suspended yesterday and Jim is still in Rome. Even a technical glitch at Heathrow has the power to unsettle us as we enjoy the comfort of our homes and our local Church.

# Yet how can we be comfortable? We see the pictures of modern Kyiv with all the infrastructure of a civilised modern capital of nearly three million people, being strafed by artillery shells with devastating impact. We see young boys, drafted into the Ukrainian army at 18, sent to defend motorway bridges having never fired a gun in anger in their lives. Could we imagine our young people standing on the Hammersmith flyover waiting for the second largest army in the world to bear down on them? Our archbishops have called this a great and terrible evil and they are right.

# Today’s readings, on this the Sunday before Lent, focus on the time that Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain to experience what we call ‘the Transfiguration’: the time when the figure of Jesus shone with the brilliance of heaven, to the utter amazement of the three disciples.

**And the liturgy gives us the clue we need to make sense of this: *Christ revealed his glory to the disciples - to strengthen them for the scandal of the Cross.* That is to say, they were given a vision of what the final victory would look like so that they could endure the unendurable: the pain and the tragedy that would unfold in Jerusalem – the trial, the crucifixion and the death of Jesus. *His glory shone from a body like our own, to show the Church that it would one day share his glory.***

**Anyone who has read the accounts of the second world war or watched the newsreels cannot but be caught up in the suffering that was inflicted on entirely innocent populations from 1930 onwards – Jews, Slavs, Gypsies, the sick, the gay community and all political opposition. And here is the current (and as it happens Jewish) Ukrainian President, whose grandfather fought the Nazis as a member of the Russian army, being accused of being a Fascist! It is all nonsense but it is what happens when people have to rely on labels to justify their hatred. And this is our first taste of what happens when a totalitarian government in Europe gets out of control, probably since the Cold War. And we aren’t ready for it.**

**So what do we do? When Peter sees the wonderful vision, his first instinct is to build permanent places for his three great heroes to live in: a way of setting the ‘good old days’ in aspic. *Master it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings: one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.* When we think things are going well, our natural instinct is to try and preserve it for as long as possible. And we have had peace in Europe for longer than at any time in the modern period. But the danger is that we have not been very good at reading the signs of what has been going on further east. As one commentator has said, Russia and China don’t work in democratic election cycles of four or five years; their regimes work in decades if not centuries which means that they don’t just tinker at the edges but can absorb almost total annihilation and inflict scorched earth policies of utter destruction, if need be, to achieve their ends. I am sure you noticed that the Gospel doesn’t even bother to give us a reply to Peter’s suggestion about buildings! Instead we get this fantastic vision of Christ in glory and these words: *‘This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him.’***

**What bits of Jesus’ teaching come to mind at this point? What about the parable of the rich farmer who has done very well for himself, who says before he goes to bed: *Mm, tomorrow I think I ought to build more barns for all the grain that I have produced.*  And of course the punch line of the story is: *it was on that very night that the man died.* Or equally, what about: *See how the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head…***

**Isn’t the message Jesus wants to share with us a challenge to our tendency to be complacent and comfortable, concerned so often with just the short term? When Moses finally met with God on the mountain, his face shone – and the people that he met afterwards were genuinely afraid of him because of the intensity of his experience up the mountain which made him terrifying! He hadn’t just been ‘mugging up’ on the actions of God, he had actually seen him. That is what made all the difference.**

# And the result? From then on, Moses was prepared for anything. There was, especially, a new steeliness that would enable him to cope with failure – including the disappointment of not leading Israel into the Promised Land.

# And there is something of that resilience as we listen to the young Ukrainians. The sight and sounds of the Russian MiG fighters and the aerial bombardments have made them realise what really matters. This is ‘home’, modern and democratic. Over the last thirty years since the fall of the Soviet Union they have enjoyed extraordinary freedoms; and they are determined that they will do all it takes to pass that freedom on to their children and their children’s children. It is almost biblical to hear them talking and to hear the stories already emerging - like the sacrifice that was made by a young soldier who, quite calculatingly, gave his life in order to stop a Russian tank advance. St Paul puts it this way: *Now the Lord is the Spirit: and all who see the Lord are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. For this reason we do not lose heart…*

# This terrible, terrible conflict in the Ukraine is not going to be resolved quickly. The loss of life, the setting up of mass transit camps full of people displaced from their homes, the creation of scores of orphans as parents stand up to this new tyranny and pay the ultimate price, is enough to depress us almost into inactivity - even though it shouldn’t.

# But my hope is that the story of the Transfiguration will act as a symbol for us to hold on to. For once the disciples had seen the end game, the glory of the Transfiguration, they were able to endure the unendurable. In the same way this young Ukrainian nation, having felt what it is like to live under a liberal democracy are beginning their terrible ‘Lent’ because they have already seen what the Resurrection looks like.

# All around the world we are being asked to use today as a day of prayer for the people of the Ukraine. We pray for an end of this invasion, this despotic attempt to extend the borders of a failed regime in Moscow. We stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people and their faith that, ultimately, they will win those freedoms back, though not without a huge amount of suffering.

# What come through so strongly via the newsreels is their conviction that God will prevail, and that democracy will be restored. And for ourselves, can we learn from them - we who are so far away from the conflict? Can we share their vision that God’s kingdom will come, *on earth as it is in heaven?* And are we also willing to make the necessary sacrifice to make it happen?