**SERMON FOR EASTER 4 | 08.05.22**

**1 Peter 2: 9-12, Revelation 7: 9-17; St John 14: 23-27)**

**Like you I have been trying to understand what is going on in Ukraine. How can it be, I have asked myself - after all that Europe went through in the second world war - that in the first quarter of the 21st century we would be witnessing the kinds of atrocities in Mariupol, Kharkiv, Luhansk and Donetsk that daily fill our news media?**

**And yet throughout it all, we hear the Russian Orthodox leader, Patriarch Kirill, talking about this as a ‘holy war’: *our forefathers faithfully served the Orthodox Church and their fatherland and it is she who should be turned to in prayer for the Russian state so that our sacred borders remain impregnable…* For the Patriarch this ‘special operation’ has the feel of a Crusade, a war in defence of Holy Rus. He would say the familiar words of 1 Peter, the opening words of our 1st reading. fit the bill exactly: *you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light,***

**So what is this ‘Holy Rus’ all about? It was the 19th century poet, Vasily Zhukovsky who said: *In the expression ‘Holy Russia’ you can hear the entirety of our unique history. It received its profound meaning from the times when we were divided so that when we were united once more; it was not to become Russia but Rus, that is, not a government, but a family with a single faith, a single tongue, the same remembrances and traditions. This is why, even in the bloodiest internecine wars, when the princes constantly fought each other for power, there was still a single, living, undivided ‘Holy Rus’ for all.* In the 1850’s, Pete*r Vyazemsky wrote: Not for glory, not for honour, did the tablets of the nation give our Russia the name “holy” but to caution us, to remind us, that we must preserve from our earliest years the fear of God so that the pure fire of faith bequeathed to us in ancient simplicity, we may pass on to our sons in full.***

**For Kirill and his colleagues, all old enough to remember the 70years of Communist atheism, there are two aims – the restoration of the Orthodox faith in a land where Christianity had all but been squeezed out of national life, and the more mystical idea of Russia as the home and haven for a chosen people - to include the whole of what was once the Russian Empire which was pretty coterminous with the old Soviet Union.**

**And its key characteristic: a renunciation of the western liberal and democratic traditions that had once been halted by the Iron Curtain and which, since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 have been gradually creeping further and further east.**

**Not for Holy Rus then, free speech, equal marriage and political diversity. According to Kirill, only the Orthodox faith is divinely inspired to bring heaven to earth; only Russian Orthodoxy has the power to transform both individual and communal longings for beauty and spiritual transformation through its liturgy and its cult of the martyrs. Yielding nothing to modern thought or behaviour, by sheer force Kirill wants to convert the overwhelming majority of Russians from mere ‘zakhosane’ (drop-in candle lighters) to ‘prikhozane’ (committed members of a congregation). Ukraine has no right to be independent, has no legitimacy as a nation state and no business to be in cahoots with the freedoms of the west.**

**And as in in all crusades throughout history, rationality, compassion, love and hope simply fly out of the window. Against the fantasies of Patriarchs and dictators alike, it is the youth of both Russia and the Ukraine who are paying the desperately high price as the war continues to intensify. The indiscriminate power to destroy is thought in the Kremlin to be a sign of strength. We all know, in fact, it to be evidence of Putin’s paranoia.**

**So what can we do?**

**In today’s 2nd reading we have this wonderful passage from Revelation 7. The word of an elder comes to St John standing in heaven, pointing to those standing nearby: *these are they who have come out of the great ordeal: they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They will hunger no more and thirst no more. The sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.* We need to hear these words as affirmation of those who have lost their lives, their homes and their loved ones in this insane war. There is a vindication for the extraordinary self-sacrifice of so many Ukrainians who have stood up to the evil flowing from the east. It doesn’t take away the suffering and it doesn’t offer some kind of false promise that this war will end any time soon. But their sacrifice is not in vain and their suffering is not forgotten. Genuinely, *we will remember them.*  As so many have testified, just knowing that that people love you and are praying for you is a huge resource to draw on.**

**The world is draped in blue and yellow; wherever you go, people are standing by the people of Ukraine – and in a vast range of different ways.**

**And we have in our readings, too, these final lines from St John 14: *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. So do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.***

**Unlike President Putin, terrified of a palace coup and made crazy by the failure of his initial plans, the Ukrainian President Zalensky shows every sign of becoming a Nobel Peace Prize winner and an icon for the true Christian tradition of being strong only when we are weak - whatever his faith tradition.**

**His resilience as well as his instinctive political ability to relate to ordinary people is not ‘an act’ and as we pray for him, we might use the words that are set for today from Psalm 23: *You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life…***

**Do I have any sympathy for Patriarch Kirill? Not a lot really because the way he identifies a ‘holy nation’ with Russia as a nation state is an absurd reading of Scripture. 1 Peter is all about being a faithful follower of Christ in the face of a society which is - increasingly - hostile to religious ideas.**

**I do understand his perfectly laudable desire, as a bishop, to help people to deepen their faith from being just ‘the lighter of candles’ to people willing to commit themselves to being disciples of Jesus.**

**But enabling that process is, ultimately, God’s work not ours and forced conversions, making people conform, have never been successful. So Kirill too needs our prayers - in the hope that his influence over the Russian President can be driven, not by fear of the west and the need to control, but by the genuine love of all God’s holy people, Russian and Ukrainian, in the east and in the west.**

**Please do all you can, over this next month, to show your love for the people of the Ukraine. Envelopes are available today and the collection buckets are out. God willing, the people there will be able to use the words of this psalm too: *though I walk through the shadow of death I shall fear no evil; for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.* May God grant peace in Ukraine.**