**First thoughts after the world has changed**

**A sermon by the Revd Neil Messer shared at The United Church, Winchester**

Sunday 13th March 2022

*Isaiah 2:1–4; Mark 12:28–34*

Occasionally there are moments when you see or hear something on the news, and you know that for good or ill, the world has changed. I remember one of those moments in 1989, when I first heard the news that the Berlin Wall was coming down. In much more sombre vein, September 11th, 2001 was another. Many of you will remember more such moments than I do.

A little over two weeks ago we lived through another of those moments, when we learned that Russia had launched a military invasion of Ukraine. Since then, we have watched scenes not seen in Europe since the end of World War 2: scenes I for one never expected to see in my lifetime.

We know the world has changed, but we have very little idea yet what that looks like. We have barely begun to understand what is going on and what it means for the future. And as Christian people and churches, we have scarcely begun to reflect on these terrible events in terms of our faith or to discern what a Christian response looks like.

Through today’s service I hope that we can make a start on that long task of making theological sense of this horror and discerning how we are called to respond.

1. Paying attention

Probably the very first thing we need to do is what I’m sure you have already been doing over the past couple of weeks: simply paying attention. Paying attention to the outrage, the horror, the pain and the suffering. And it’s part of our moral responsibility to our neighbours, I think, to keep doing that: not to turn our eyes away even when it would be easier and more comfortable to do so; to pay attention and to go on paying attention.

2. Reactions and emotions

Having done that, I think the next step that is necessary is to name and acknowledge our reactions and emotions. I think somewhere near the beginning of this process of reflecting, trying to make sense of what’s happened and discern what we are called to be and to do, is to name the whole complex mix of feelings that this catastrophe provokes in us. Now I don’t know what you are feeling: I can’t see inside your heads. What I can do is share some of my own reactions, which I suspect may not be mine alone.

First: shock and bewilderment that this could be happening in Europe – that the peace and security forged in the wake of two world wars could disintegrate so quickly and easily. Then, horror at the terrible scenes unfolding on our TV screens and news feeds. Compassion for

the people whose suffering we witness – people so much like us, living lives so much like ours.

Anger and outrage: I feel I almost have no language to speak of the flagrant, cynical cruelty and disregard for any kind of moral restraint shown by Vladimir Putin and those who serve him. Shame and (again) anger at the lukewarm hospitality shown by this country towards those fleeing the conflict – so far at least. Fear and anxiety about what it all might lead to: it is quite literally too close to home.

These are some of my feelings and reactions, some of which at least I’m guessing you will share. It is important to name them. But they also invite critical – self-critical – scrutiny; some of them may call for a certain kind of repentance.

Why am I especially horrified that this is happening in Europe, especially outraged that it’s people like me who are suffering in this way? We’ve seen plenty of this kind of suffering in other parts of the world: why is it a special shock when it happens to Europeans?

Or again: does my compassion have a certain detachment about it: am I distancing myself from the suffering and misery for fear of being overwhelmed by them? Is my compassion overshadowed by my fear and anxiety for myself and my nearest and dearest?

These are perfectly natural human feelings and reactions. But they might also disclose to me some of the limits of my own sympathy and solidarity with my fellow human creatures; they might teach me things about myself that are not entirely comfortable to learn.

3. Theological and ethical reflection

Having named and begun to reflect on our feelings, we also need to begin to reflect theologically and ethically on this changed world. How do we understand these events in relation to the loving purposes of God disclosed in Jesus Christ? As Christian believers and followers of Jesus, where do we find good and evil in this situation; how do we discern right and wrong?

The Bible does not speak with one voice about war. Some texts command it, others call us to love our enemies. But among these diverse voices are passages like today’s reading from Isaiah; passages which unfold a vision of God’s good purpose for humankind and the world. In God’s good future, there will be no need for military academies or anti-tank weapons, because God will rule in peace and justice, and war will be no more.

It’s in the light of that vision that we should interpret all those diverse scriptural voices on armed conflict. In our present broken and sinful world, war may be a tragic inevitability, but it is no part of God’s ultimate will or purpose.

In God’s good future there will be no more war; but what about the here and now?

We cannot bring in God’s good future, but we are called to live here and now in the light of it, in ways that witness to it. And some Christians argue this calls for radical non-violence. The call in our Gospel reading to love our neighbour as ourselves – and even to love our enemies, as Jesus says elsewhere – forbids us from taking up arms, even in the face of injustice, oppression and violence. For some, this goes to the very heart of Christian identity.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas is well known for saying that Christians are ‘people who would rather die than kill.’

This seems to have been a pretty widely held view during the Church’s first couple of centuries, when Christians were a marginalised, persecuted group. But then the Church’s fortunes changed; and for some leading Christian thinkers of the time, this required what Paul Ramsey once called a ‘change of tactics’ in loving your neighbour. That’s how Christian just war theory began.

The reasoning goes like this. If I am attacked by an aggressor who is threatening my life, they are still my neighbour whom I am called to love. So I shouldn’t retaliate or defend myself, even if my life is in danger. But suppose I see an aggressor threatening someone else’s life? Love for that neighbour requires me to defend them, by force if need be. By extension, political leaders may be called to use force to defend their people, out of love and responsibility for them.

But if love of your neighbour is your reason for fighting, that should make a difference to the spirit in which you fight, and it places various restraints on when and how you go about it. War can only ever be a last resort. It’s only justifiable if the good it will do is in proportion to the harm it causes. You don’t target non-combatants. And you are still called to love your enemies, so there are some ways you must never treat them.

To put my cards on the table, I am a reluctant just war theorist. In the end I think that in a broken and sinful world, we find injustices and evils that just have to be resisted by force for love of their innocent victims.

In the light of all this, it hardly needs saying that Vladimir Putin’s aggression cannot be justified by any credible Christian ethic. The view I’ve outlined suggests that Ukrainian Christians who take up arms against it may be acting consistently with their Christian faith. It also suggests that other countries certainly have a responsibility to support the victims of aggression, but they need to be very careful how they do and don’t get involved. For example, NATO members are almost certainly right not to start World War 3 by imposing a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

4. How should we respond?

For some of you listening to this sermon, these questions might be very close to home – because you’ve been involved in the fighting or the humanitarian effort yourself, or you have family or friends caught up in the conflict.

Many of us, I’m guessing, find ourselves at more of a distance: watching the horrors unfold, and wondering how we can and should respond as Christians. So, I’ll finish with a few very brief comments on what it might mean to be a community of Jesus’ disciples in the face of these terrible events.

Perhaps the most important thing a Christian community does is to pray. In our prayers we not only appeal for God’s help; we also place ourselves in solidarity with those who suffer, and we open ourselves up to the possibility of being the answer to our own prayers.

A Christian community is also called to witness. To use a well-known phrase, the Church is called to be a ‘sign, instrument and foretaste’ of God’s coming peaceable kingdom. So part of our response to this specific crisis is just to be that kind of community: in every aspect of our life together, to recognize and practice ‘the things that make for peace’ (Luke 19:42).

Praying and living in this way should shape our attitudes (which matter, because they in turn shape our actions). This goes back to what I said earlier about reflecting critically on our own feelings and reactions.

For example: Putin’s action is evil; we should name it as such and oppose it however we can. But there’s also something dangerously comforting about having such a blatant evil available to condemn.

I can luxuriate in my moral outrage; and that makes it easy for me not to notice the ways I may be entangled in the very evils I condemn. Many of us burn Russian gas to heat our houses, and so inadvertently help finance the Russian military. And there’s nothing at all we can do about it, until the UK manages to phase out Russian gas supplies.

So for sure we should speak out and act against evil; but our speaking and acting need to be tempered with humility and penitence for the ways we ourselves are inescapably entangled in the sin of the world.

Conclusion

In the first part of J.R.R. Tolkein’s Lord of the Rings, there is an oft-quoted exchange between the wizard Gandalf and Frodo the hobbit, after Gandalf has disclosed to Frodo the terrible truth about Frodo’s enchanted Ring. (Remember that these lines were written not long after the Second World War by a man who had lived through the horrors of the First.)

‘I wish it need not have happened in my time,’ said Frodo.

‘So do I,’ said Gandalf, ‘and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.’

May God give us, and those for whom we pray, the grace to live faithfully and well in the times that are given to us. Amen.

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