

Elena Kozhena was a small girl when her family fled the siege of Leningrad. Between September 1941 and January 1944 around 800 000 lost their lives there. That's a higher number of civilian casualties than those from the whole of the United States and the United Kingdom combined. More on Elena a little later...

I am sure that you, like me, feel the darkness of these past two weeks. Familiar, everyday comforts are finely woven with a sharpened awareness, the knowledge that for too many others *everything* has been snatched away. Life feels precarious. Whatever we think, say or do to shield ourselves doesn't quite work.

Psalms of lament express that for which we barely find words.

*We are brought down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.*

Rise up and help us;

*rescue us because of your unfailing love. **Psalm 44***

Solidarity with the victims of war demands that we make those verses our own. We want to share a measure of their pain and fear. We carry these not-so-far-away people in our thoughts as we go about the daily round. Yet overactive empathy also feels dangerous. My own instinct is to limit news intake and pay heed to overall health and balance. That said, there's at least one time every day when I steel myself to engage.

The words of a fatherly friend resonate as never before: '*It is **impossible** for me to read the newspaper without deep prayer.*'

May we all pray creatively, from the heart, in whatever ways feel right for us.

It is surely right to be grateful for life, health, and freedom. Instead of wallowing in sadness we must actively seek out all that's life-giving, taking care of those around us too. We must be vigilant, cutting ourselves loose from the debilitating fog of poisonous dread. Again, and again.

It is wholesome to enjoy what God has given us, and to feel the deepest gratitude. It doesn't take developmental psychology text books to realise the importance of being loved and safe, of being able to explore who we are and what we might be about in the world. The ancient Hebrew word 'Shalom' conveys a sense of fulfilment and flourishing.

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Working for placement at St. Columba's, North Shields a few days ago I found myself occupying the whole upstairs landing. I wrestled with swathes of water-resistant cloth, feeling non-plussed as I watched it spill out beyond the bedroom doorways. Shifting and stitching such slippery stuff fills a day. Then, finally, the groundwork for my placement project is done.

The four and a half metre banner is covered in darkest red. This enterprise feels both rash and thrilling. Anything could happen.

With, and for, the folks at St Columba's I will gather stories, songs, prayers, photographs, paints, cloth, and brushes. We will combine worship with painting. We hope to show several Resurrection narratives, taken from each of the gospels. Yet this is no tidy, linear process. Anything could happen.

Friday by Friday, we may turn the dark backdrop into scenes of the North Shields coastline, populated by Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, Thomas....

Jesus met the disciples in their distress. Jesus continues to meet us, exactly where we are. Jesus says, *'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'* This is the text we hope to share with the world outside.

As I pause work for the day, I remember support received from one of Horsley's elders during 2020. Pray, but don't let sorrow crush you. Cast your cares upon God, that's enough. Easier said than done, yet today I have released many an arrow prayer. Time now for food and company.

Jesus who is with us always, I ask that you touch my sister in the underground shelter, my brother conscripted to the Russian army. Give them deep inner peace. Make yourself known to all who are responsible for unleashing terror and those tempted to do so. Grant calm, patience, understanding and wisdom to all people. Show me my part in this. Amen.

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And Elena? While she was still far from Leningrad her sister perished. Then, one night, after the little village in the Steppes was liberated, her mother roused her from sleep. The two of them went outdoors and stared into the vast, starlit landscape, so recently scarred by war. Let's listen to Elena's own words:

*"From our cramped and meagre life, which fit into a tiny circle of light from the broiler lamp, we had suddenly stepped into this deeply and fully breathing world, so generous to us that one could not avoid believing, walking down this road, that there were **no incurable wounds** or unfulfillable dreams."*

Heartbreak sits close with tenderness, with courage and, yes, even hope. ***'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'***

If you would like to join in with 'Thoughtful Art' at St Columba's, North Shields please do contact me via the editor. Each self-standing session runs on a Friday afternoon, starting March 18th. Come in old clothes. We will start with a short reflection and round off with 10-15 minutes' worship in church.



Roberta

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