

**13 March 2022; Lent 2**

**Philippians 3: 17 – 4:1; Luke 13: 31-35**

*Ashdon 9.30am*

**1. Information overload; the drive to action**

As I came to think about what to say today, I felt a sense of helplessness. In face of the news about the situation in Ukraine, what could I say? And I think this is something that affects us all in a similar way. We watch the news, and we feel helpless. What can we say, and what can we do?

We watch the news on TV, and rolling news gives us information overload. Such situations drive us to action and to reaction. Those most affected are, inevitably, driven to action: to flee the danger, and we see them leaving their homes in droves, carrying very little: children and old people, all driven out from cities that were once vibrant and are now reduced to rubble. There are those with friends or relatives in Ukraine who can respond in positive ways, like our own Simon who is flying to Poland at the end of the week to try to help his close friend Niall and his Ukrainian family. Our thoughts and prayers are with him. But most of us have no personal connection. Still the news drives community action, with fundraising events quite rightly springing up all over the place. We are fearful and helpless – our

instinct is to be able to DO something. And if we cannot help, we need to be prepared. This week our daughter sent us details of what to do in face of a nuclear attack. There is danger that governments too will be driven to action and reaction to what is going on – and where will that lead us all?

**2. The need for reflection**

This sense of helplessness is familiar to anyone who has been with someone following a tragic bereavement. What can we do or say in face of the enormity of loss? Words and advice are useless. Practical support may be of value, yet too often all we can do is sit alongside in silence.

Early on in the Ukraine conflict, as the Russian army continued its advance, a radio interviewer was pressing the former head of the secret intelligence service M16 for his reaction. He simply said to the radio audience "Pause. Reflect". "Pause. Reflect". In a similar way, when St Aidan, who died in 651 saw the Danes attacking Bamburgh Castle, (which they later destroyed in 993), his prayer was simply "Lord, see what they are doing." A prayer of paying attention taken from Psalm 142.

For those of us far from the conflict, although we may try to all we can, recognizing our own helplessness is important, and perhaps the call to pause and reflect, which formed the essence of the weekly sermon this week from Chelmsford Cathedral is an important one this morning. Certainly we hope that those in positions of power will be doing that – and perhaps even too that this is advice that President Putin himself may take.

There are many Biblical stories and passages that suggest that we need to do more pausing and reflecting, so that we may avoid hasty reaction and learn to see as God sees. One thing that our churches can offer to our local communities is not doctrine or easy answers but space for reflection. Listen to the opening words of the Psalm set for today, Psalm 27:

*The Lord is my saving light; whom should I fear?  
God is my fortress; what should I dread?  
When the violent come at me to eat me alive,  
a mob eager to kill – they waver, they collapse.  
Should battalions lay siege, I will not fear;  
should war rage against me, even then I will trust.  
One thing I ask the Lord, one thing I seek:  
to live in the house of God every day of my life,  
caught up in God's beauty, at prayer in his temple.*

This is not a prayer of evasion, any more than the oft quoted line from Psalm 46: *'Be still, and know that I am God'*. It is not an invitation to silent withdrawal, since that Psalm is also about battle, war and desolation. It is, rather, in the **midst** of such situations that God invites us to be still and pay attention to his voice.

In the book of Job, when disaster strikes, Job's immediate response is to sit with his friends in silence for seven days and seven nights. In a similar way, Ezekiel's response to catastrophe is solitude and silence as the only place to start working out how to respond. And of course, again and again - starting in the very first chapter of Mark's Gospel - Jesus seeks out solitude and silence both as a regular spiritual practice and in particular times of challenge and change.

### 3. **Learning to see as God sees**

These times of reflection are times when we can learn to see as God sees. This is something we need very badly. Locally, when we are being asked to make changes to the way our church operate, reducing services and taking on more local responsibility, we need to learn to see with different eyes, not simply to yearn for the past when our

churches were full and each village had its own priest. This need to see afresh is behind Bishop Guli's invitation for a Holy Sabbatical during Lent – something she was suggesting long before the world was faced with the current crisis in Ukraine.

In the Gospels, Jesus heals many people but has a particular focus on healing the blind. Indeed in his very first piece of teaching in Luke 4 he identifies "recovery of sight for the blind" as a key part of his mission. And one of the longest chapters in John's Gospel is entirely devoted to the healing of a man born blind. And whilst these are healings like any other, in every case Jesus' healing of blind people in the Gospels is always a rebuke to those who think they can see, particularly the religious elite. Jesus is constantly inviting us to develop our capacity to see clearly. In today's gospel reading, Jesus's response to news of his own coming persecution is to lament over Jerusalem as he prepares for what he knows awaits him there. Jerusalem has failed to pay attention, to notice what God is doing.

Today is not a day for glib words of reassurance, any more than it is if we sit with a friend or loved one when they face deep shock and loss. Practical help may be valued and important where it is possible, but where it is not, we need to learn to see more clearly

through sitting in God's presence. In this season of Lent, we pray for protection not only from personal or national disaster, but also from evil and its effects. The attack on Ukraine has been dubbed an act of evil, but it is not only our enemies who are subject to evil thoughts or actions. As we learn to see more clearly, we learn to see also into our own hearts and minds.

Our hymns today are all for guidance and trust, and I end with the words of today's post-communion prayer, which seems to me to be a very pertinent one in the current situation:

Almighty God, you see that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves:  
keep us both outwardly in our bodies,  
and inwardly in our souls;  
that we may be defended from all adversities  
that may happen to the body,  
and from all evil thoughts  
which may assault and hurt the soul,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,

**Amen.**