

**Reflection for Prayer Service for Ukraine
At St. Mary's Ukrainian Catholic Church
Sudbury
Palm/Passion Sunday 10th April, 2022**

Archbishop Anne Germond



The front of St. Mary's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Sudbury on Palm Sunday 2022

The Escape to Egypt: Matthew 2: 13-15

¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”^[a]

I give hearty thanks for the opportunity to be with you, my siblings in Christ, for this service of prayer for peace in a time of war as we stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, and their extended family here at home through this time of great trial.

There is strength in this act of worship, our voices united as one, as we lift our hearts to God. In this prophetic act of witness, especially as we enter the paschal mysteries of the passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we proclaim as a resurrection people that:

Goodness is stronger than evil.
Love is stronger than hate.
Light is stronger than darkness.
Life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours through Him who loved us.

These prophetic and hopeful words were spoken by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as he stared down the evil of apartheid and never gave up believing that one day all South Africans would be free from its grip.

Yet I must admit that the 'hearty' in my thankfulness today is from a broken and contrite heart, ripped open by the horrors and the cost of this unjust war.

For weeks now, ever since the first Russian troops invaded Ukraine on February 24th, we have watched with horror the violent and intentional decimation and destruction of whole villages, towns, buildings, homes, communities, and lives of the citizens of that proud nation. Reporters have brought us up to the minute details on the invasion and its devastating consequences – families torn apart as women and children and the frail elderly, carrying only what they could manage, began their frantic flight from harm's way while men old enough stayed to defend their homeland. The images are beyond horrific - a maternity hospital with women in labour inside bombed; a theatre with families hiding out in the basement destroyed.....and on and on and on.

And our hearts are also breaking for what has become of Russia – for that people as the world turns its back on them through sanctions, who have also lost beloved family members in the fighting – perhaps some soldiers were called to fight in a war whose cause they may not believe in, without the ability to refuse.

History repeats itself. The atrocities we are witnessing today happened in Jesus time and have happened in every generation since. How many times have we said, "Never again"? War's perpetual lesson reminds us that the most vulnerable suffer when the most powerful are irresponsible.

The story of Jesus' life, which will culminate in this holiest of weeks in the Christian calendar, is rooted in evil. How ironic that a narrative about redemption, salvation and reconciliation must first wade through the abyss of Herod's ego maniacal behaviour to fulfil the prophecy, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." (Matthew 2.13).

Out of the atrocities of this present war we have also witnessed the great determination and the resistance of the Ukrainian people and army as they refuse to relinquish their homeland. We have seen the courageous and determined leadership of Ukraine's President Zelensky. Once a comedian, he stands night after night in the city square wearing an army green t-shirt broadcasting words of hope and encouragement to his people; calling the world to act swiftly and do all it can to stop the violence that is happening all around him.

This war has brought out the worst and the best in humanity as neighbouring countries have thrown open their doors to welcome Ukraine's displaced people. The acts of kindness and mercy, heartbreaking in their beauty. I bet barbecued Polish sausage never tasted so good to famished refugees as they crossed over into Poland, and what about all those strollers left at the train station for families to take as they carried on their journey to safety? Love is truly an action word.

I loved what Fr. Peter Bodnar said in his opening remarks today that sunflowers turn to face the sun when the sun is shining, and when it is raining they turn to face each other.

Over the last weeks since the war began, we have seen the nations of the world and people of all faiths coming together to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine. If we didn't know the bright blue and yellow colours of the Ukrainian flag before, the words of their beautiful national anthem, they are now fixed in our memory. It was wonderful to stand on Notre Dame Ave with friends and supporters of the Ukrainian community ahead of this afternoon's service and see the huge blue and yellow flags waving proudly at the passing traffic and to hear horns blaring as vehicles went by on the road. Let us never stop our efforts for peace or our prayers – we cannot 'normalize' what is happening or accept it.

It is tempting, especially after we have just lived through a pandemic, to turn our eyes away from all the shocking images, to stop our ears from hearing – from the horror and pain and suffering, because we find it is just too much for us to bear. It is too difficult to watch the constant bombardment of a proud nation, brought so low. If we find it unbearable, how much more so those who are living in the midst of it?

To turn our eyes away from all this suffering; to close our ears to the cries of those begging for help – that is not a choice that we who are marked as Christ's own forever can make. We are called, as Christ did, to go straight into the suffering places of this world – to feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, clothe the naked, welcome the

stranger, “For, I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” says Jesus in his prophetic words of judgment on the nations.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me”. Our Lord and Saviour once experienced the kindness of strangers as the holy family fled from the tyrannical Herod.

On Friday, this Stranger, the One who thirsts and hungers for righteousness, will hang naked from a cross, his arms extended in love for the whole world. Before his death we will hear him cry out in anguish, his heart breaking as ours break today – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”, “I thirst”, “Mother behold your Son, Son behold your mother”, “Into your hands I commend my spirit”, and “It is finished”.

Jesus will be taken down from the cross and laid to rest in a borrowed tomb.

But that will not be the end of the story – for on Easter Sunday morning he will rise from the dead and we will know that our redeemer lives and that:

Goodness is stronger than evil.
Love is stronger than hate.
Light is stronger than darkness.
Life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours through Him who loved us.

May these prophetic words be true for Ukraine.
May these words be true today.
Let peace prevail.
Amen.