

The First Sunday of Lent, Year C, 2022

Romans 10.8b-13; Luke 4.1-13, Psalm 91.1-2, 9-end

Last week I was asked to attend a two-day ecumenical meeting of 170 plus delegates from across Europe as a member of the Standing Committee of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Austria. The meeting was organised by CEC, the Conference of European Churches with a breadth of participation stretching from Italy to Finland, from Waldensians to Orthodox. Due to the war in Ukraine room needed to be given to voices from Ukraine. The first speaker from Lviv spoke of the crisis comparing it to an apocalyptic event reminding us that apocalyptic means unveiling. He used this word as he considered how individuals, communities, churches and nation states were responding to the invasion of his country. In a crisis like the war in Ukraine there is no place to hide. I am again reminded of Adam and Eve seeking to hide themselves from God in the garden, because they were ashamed. I know of the turmoil this crisis and other crises cause in me raising a host of questions. What can I give? How can I give? What must I do? What must we do?

On Tuesday as many of you know our diocesan Bishop, Robert, with others organised a diocesan wide prayer service in the light of the ongoing war. People spoke from our congregations in Kyiv, Moscow and Riga, the capital of Latvia. We cannot be indifferent as citizens of the world, as people living in Europe, and especially in Austria with its historical past that reaches geographically into present-day Ukraine, moreover we cannot be indifferent because as Christians we are bound up in one fellowship of love. As we said on Ash Wednesday. "Love is not that we loved God, but that God loved us." We cannot be indifferent as Christians living in Europe. We cannot be indifferent as members of our diocese are directly affected. Some of whom we know.

The Chaplain in Moscow spoke powerfully into the void of much unveiling, signalling and posturing. He said,

“The enemy we face is not political but supra-political. We do not, as Christian believers, fight against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. And Jesus defeated those forces not by acquiring an army and crushing his enemy by force, not by blood taken – but by blood given. He defeated the true enemy, the devil, with all his pride and hatred and bitterness, lies and fear and cruelty – by Jesus’ obedience to His heavenly Father, by his sacrifice of himself, by his speaking the truth, doing acts of service and showing love. He defeated him by going to the cross in love for us.”

The reality of our human existence outlined here may be foreign to many, but it addresses the reality of what we face at all times and once again starkly now because of the war in Ukraine. It is a reality Jesus faced at the outset of his earthly ministry and is captured in what is known as the Temptations, but might be better be described by the word testings. Jesus is being tested.

Let us remind ourselves where we are in the telling of the story. Jesus having been baptised by John is spoken to by God so that all who are present at the Jordan river may listen in, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ Only then is Jesus driven into the wilderness, by the Holy Spirit, where he stays for forty days tempted by the adversary, the devil - evil personified Jesus’ testing begins in the wilderness and it continues throughout his time in the wilderness.

Our Lenten observance aligns itself intentionally with Jesus’ wilderness experience. The testings don’t come at the end. They are there throughout. And there is a fundamental truth suggested here esp. for those young in the faith. Having made a commitment, having experienced God, having been baptised temptations immediately begin. As always I think of those medieval paintings where the saints are being attacked by hundreds of little demons and things that go bump in the night. These vivid medieval paintings are strange and perplexing portrayals for modern eyes,

but yet so true. They tell us that we are not well equipped to handle the presence of evil; our casualness suggests a poverty of imagination.

But naturally our focus is on the three foundational temptations, as it must be. We note with regard to bread and all it symbolises our basic need for food, clothing, shelter - these earthy things, these material things - that the devil is not only persistent, but he also bides his time. He doesn't give up so easily. The adversary persists till the wilderness experience has ended. We are told that Jesus is famished. This is when the devil makes his first move of three. Timing is all important. As we see again a little later. "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."

It is often noted that to counter the devil Jesus calls on Scripture. Reminding us that Jesus was steeped in the Scriptures of his people. We can have some confidence that as a man he was moulded and formed by these as he sought to be obedient to God as Father, but also to God as he makes himself known in the Scriptures. We are to be formed by spiritual practice like the keeping of the Christian year, the observance of this season of Lent being one such element, but also by the Scriptures, which include the Hebrew Bible and this is what happens by immersing ourselves in them: formation.

We have now arrived at the central temptation that we must consider at this time as it speaks of kingdoms. It speaks of all the kingdoms of the world. It speaks of empire. The devil says, "If you worship me, it will all be yours." Above I spoke of different belongings. As Christians we recognise Jesus' kingdom as being not of this world, as he says. We know that he gives a peace that the world cannot give. We recognise the sovereignty of God over our lives. And as we look to God, as we as Christians look to God as sovereign, we recognise our belonging to one another. We see Christian

brothers and sisters in Ukrainians and Russians. We see how national belonging can divide. Add to this how church belonging can divide. Russians either side of the border are divided in a war that serves no one well, except a few and even they in truth are not well served. They give themselves to a delusion of their own making. It is an illusion. At this time as always we need to be looking to God. We see our common humanity of course. We see how things are bound up together.

Monika in her eco-blog reminds us how the great Danube River connects us with Ukrainians. Rivers don't respect borders. Living in Austria we share this river that has served as an artery of travel, leisure (river cruises) communication and commerce. And so we must know to which kingdom we belong to before all else. For some an either-or approach will simply be too much. For others this is the only way citing that Jesus says of himself, I am the way. Others will say, 'We are not of the world, but in the world.' Each of these approaches finds expression in Christian communities. Think of the Amish, the Mennonites. Think of the Church of England. Think of martyrs who do not budge one iota. The response we make will be apocalyptic. It will reveal to us something about ourselves and to which kingdom we belong and to what extent. It may be a painful revelation. What is revealed to us may have been hidden from us. We may have hidden it away ourselves. It may have been gnawing at us all the time.

Lines from the Lenten Prose cut deep, which we at Christ Church give attention to as individuals and as a community year by year. They cut deeper every year. Not less. They prove the worth of ritual faithfully observed. Their origin has been traced back to the 10th century. The singing of the Lenten Prose today loses nothing of its actuality, if we give attention to it, as we are invited to do. Some of the phrases that speak to me hauntingly are: we lift to thee Redeemer with weeping eyes our holy pleadings. We ask God to hearken to our supplications as his weeping children. We weep because we are sorry and ashamed. Another phrase is: we lay our sins before

You. We spread them before God. We no longer veil them. If only! We make faltering steps. We know where hope is to be found. We know where salvation is to be found. We know where mercy is to be found. We cry, Lord. have mercy!

We are all a work in progress. We haven't even begun to fathom the love of God often glibly referenced. What I am saying is captured in the first stanza of a hymn and I would say hidden. There we read "it is a love beyond all thought and fantasy."

O love, how deep, how broad, how high,
beyond all thought and fantasy,
that God, the Son of God, should take
our mortal form for mortals' sake!

At the outset of Putin's military aggression, which needs to be recognised as we see 100,000s of people fleeing their homes, I received this email at the outset of the war. It concerns the sovereignty of God and it touches on the third temptation. The correspondent writes,

"Alas, Auden's poem, 'September 1, 1939' comes to mind. I fear the Ukrainians will be slaughtered like Polish cavalry against Hitler's panzers. I know, we must trust in God's providence at this time as in all times but it requires summoning an act of the will today."

The commentator might have added tomorrow and the next day.

We must trust in God's providence, which means trusting in God's sovereignty. These go hand in hand. God is sovereign. We learn to trust that this is so. Jesus knows who he is, "He is the beloved Son." He needs not to put God to the test. He too must trust and does trust. As we heard in the Eucharistic prayer of last Sunday,

Lord God, you are the most holy one,
enthroned in splendour and light,
yet in the coming of your Son Jesus Christ
you reveal the power of your love
made perfect in our human weakness. (Eucharistic prayer F)

He must trust the words spoken to him by the Father. And we as people of Christian faith are called to trust in God even in these dark hours. We in our walk with God as we grow in Christ heed words that stretch back over the millennia, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

And in this dark hour in Europe we don’t lose sight of the people in many different conflicts who have been facing darkness over the last decades. The Council of Foreign Relations lists 27 conflicts worldwide. Different lines of the Lenten litany/responsory stand out each year. This year,

“Accept our repentance, Lord for the wrongs we have done, for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty.”

In this hour in which much is being unveiled such as our pride and hypocrisy I take us forward in the story and back to last Sunday when we considered The Transfiguration. Not only is Jesus God’s beloved Son, but we are now told with the disciples in no uncertain terms to “Listen to him!” May we in prayer, worship, reflection, acts of charity, as we observe Lent, as we respond to the crisis before us, “Listen to him!” And find there a sure source for hope that will be our lantern and guide. Saying, Jesus is Lord as in the letter to Romans means something. It cuts deep. It requires listening to him. Earlier I mentioned a correspondent’s reference to Auden’s poem. I end with the final stanza.

And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages: