

## Address by Nigel Guthrie for Sunday, March 6<sup>th</sup> 2022

‘Why do the nations so furiously rage together; why do the nations imagine a vain thing?’

Those opening words of psalm 2 are memorably set to music as a bass aria by Handel in Messiah and they remind us of a question that has been asked from time immemorial. Why do people engage in conflict which brings such destruction and suffering often for vain reasons?

It has been heartbreaking to see the conflict unfold over the past days in Ukraine and to witness the immense human suffering being inflicted over what seems to many of us like an utterly futile war.

But it is also distressing to learn how deeply the Russian people have been deceived by Vladimir Putin and his supporters. It appears that some of the young soldiers sent into Ukraine really did believe they were just on a military exercise. And many older people in Russia rely on what is told them by state media outlets.

The situation reminds me of my visit to Dresden in February 1990 as part of a representative group from the churches in Coventry. There were many places in Dresden where the immense destruction caused by the bombing of the city by the allies including Britain was evident. But we were greeted with a friendly welcome and warm hospitality. By then there was a real desire to break away from the sphere of the Soviet Union and for East Germany to join West German. But one of the things that surprised us was the thirst for information about life in Western Europe. People really didn't know what life was like due to the way in which information was controlled. Although, to be fair, we had little idea about the realities of life in East Germany. Of course, with the internet, that can't happen in the same way now and many, if not all, younger Russians must have some idea about what is really going on in Ukraine in spite of efforts to close down social and other media inside Russia.

But what should our response be as we keep Lent against the traumatic backdrop of war and uncertainty?

We must certainly pray, and know that our prayers are appreciated by Ukrainians, the majority of whom practice the Christian faith. And our prayer might well include lament and the asking of questions like the psalmist. We can't know the answers

and we certainly can't know what will happen next but we can offer our questions and despair to God knowing that God will accept our desire to support those who are suffering and our longing for peace.

And we can offer practical or financial help. I understand that donations through the DEC are being doubled by the Government at the moment and the need is growing rapidly as well over a million people are now displaced from Ukraine. I have included an internet link and phone number in the mailing.

[dec.org.uk](http://dec.org.uk) 0370 6060900

It was the immense refugee crisis caused by the Second World War that brought Christian Aid into being. Now many organisations including YMCA and Christian Aid are putting their resources towards the support of those fleeing from Ukraine and our support for them will be an effective way of getting help to those most in need.

And then perhaps we should get involved politically because the government is likely to be responsive to public pressure. There is always a reluctance in some quarters to accept refugees, or to accept as many as we might. Yet this is one of the best things we can possibly do in a time of conflict. Those who have come here as refugees in the past have made immense contributions to our life and remain ever grateful to this country. Most will want to return home when conditions improve. To close our doors to refugees at this time would be an act of shame which would stain this country for many years to come.

And finally we should keep ourselves informed about the terrible war – but we should not get obsessed with it. I heard the term 'doom scrolling' for the first time this week. It refers to the practice of scrolling down through news reports on social media or elsewhere always finding the next terrible story. There are two reasons why this might just be the temptation we need to resist this Lent.

Firstly, it is bad for us. People are increasingly realising the overwhelming negative effect that such behaviour can have on our emotional lives. I know that several people are giving up Social Media for Lent and if we feel it is getting to us then perhaps that is the fast we should make. And certainly to limit our exposure to the news through the day is good practice in self-care.

But secondly it distracts us from attending to those around us many of whom need our kindness and our listening ear. Most of us can't do very much to help the people

of Ukraine directly but we can all do something to support our families, neighbours, friends and colleagues many of whom are finding life difficult and stressful at the moment. We have entered a period of uncertainty following the Covid pandemic which is unlike anything most of us have experienced. We need to keep our focus on being good friends, family members and neighbours because many people are feeling distinctly shaky at the moment. As we face uncertain and challenging times we need each other, and we need to the assurance of God's presence with us. I am pleased that we are now able to offer simple things again like refreshments after church on Sunday and Thursday, like our café and Lent Groups. The Covid Pandemic has revealed a pandemic of loneliness in our country and that is something that we can all help to address.

In the wilderness Jesus was tempted at every turn to follow what would bring him comfort, power and certainty. He resolutely stood against these temptations and reaffirmed his reliance on God's grace and provision. And in our first reading, too, God's provision is celebrated in the Harvest by the bringing of offerings and the telling of stories of the ancestors who had been delivered by God's hand from harsh oppression of the Egyptians. We are challenged today to put our trust in the unfailing mercies of God and to pray and assist those who are suffering so tragically on the borders of Europe.