

Choral Communion - Sunday 13th March 2022 – Lent 2.

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35.

Title: Making choices.

One of the bi-products of the recent Covid pandemic for children is that it not only interfered with their academic development but also their emotional development. At the secondary school at which I am a governor, this has become increasingly evident by a deterioration in children's use of appropriate language and behaviour. Unsurprisingly therefore, the school has homed in on these problems by helping students pay particular attention to the choices they make and getting them to reflect upon what constitutes bad choices and what good choices. Whilst bad choices are punished (ranging from detentions right up to exclusion from school) and good choices are rewarded, this in a sense is 'to shut the door after the horse has bolted'. What this school (in common with all other schools in the country) is trying to do is to encourage students to be their own police officers by internalising that which distinguishes right from wrong, and to develop the self-confidence to stand up to others who would lead them astray. This is particularly hard for children but especially teenagers, when so much of their lives are in a state of flux, who want so much to be popular amongst their peers. Of course, making bad choices is not confined to children and teenagers. Adults are perfectly capable of doing this as well. All of us are fallible human beings and at times get things wrong, for which I hope all of us attempt to make restitution. But there are times when a person's understanding of a moral code has become so individualised that it parts company completely with the majority world view of what constitutes a moral code for humanity. Then that one person's bad choices can have mega implications for many innocent men women and children. We are witnessing such a situation in Ukraine.

As far as one can judge, it would appear that President Putin initiated the present hostilities (which actually began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea) in order to reclaim countries that formally formed part of the old USSR. Empire building is not unique to Russia. In times past Britain and many other European nations have also fallen prey to this particular tendency. But to have learnt nothing from history by seeking to impose the will of a powerful nation on its less powerful neighbour in the 21st century has **nothing** to do setting people free to live self-determined fulfilled lives, but **everything** to do with enslaving them. And, as has always been the case in the past, it is always the most innocent members of society who suffer. None are more innocent than mothers in the last stages of labour and newly born infants.

Much of the rest of the world wants to challenge this injustice and support the people of Ukraine in their moment of need. In the face of this singularly bad choice made by President Putin, there are many, many examples of good choices made not just by countries, aid organisations but by ordinary citizens, offering to put up Ukrainian families in their own homes, enacting the timeless quality of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. But as the Practical Theologian Stephen Pattison has pointed out, there is one question that remains unanswered in the parable and that is this: what to do about the robbers on the road? Tending the needs of suffering individuals, important though it is, just helps them. Attacking the causes of their suffering at source arguably could help so many more. And here NATO is on the horns of a dilemma. Although it is promoting widespread sanctions, to actively engage in hostilities with the Russian Federation runs the risk of escalating the fighting to a full blown world war. But to not engage Russian forces directly smacks to me of appeasement, appearing to give President Putin 'carte blanche' to do whatever he likes.

Both the Old Testament and the New are full of examples of small nations being oppressed by others, of ordinary people fleeing for their very lives, of some being led astray by moral laxity, and, despite everything, of believers holding fast to their faith. In our Epistle this morning, although Paul is not writing to the Philippian Church at a time of invasion, he is writing at a time of moral laxity. Many in that community were living corrupt lives, searching after transitory pleasures. Some were even distorting their faith in order to justify the sins of the flesh to which they felt drawn. Paul's response is clear: "Imitate me" He doesn't just imply "Follow what I say" but "Do what I do". He is clear that those who continue to believe in Christ have higher standards to live by than those who do not believe. Whilst some of those without faith can live by high standards too, for Christians this is no optional extra; our citizenship is not of this world but of heaven. It is not only Paul we seek to follow but Christ himself.

If our aim is to follow the example of Jesus, then we must be constantly familiarising ourselves with what he said and how he acted throughout his relatively short earthly life. In this morning's gospel, as it begins we hear that Jesus is faced with a choice; **should he run away or should he stay** and face up to that which lies ahead? This is a choice that every Ukrainian is being faced with today. But what might be the right choice for them in their particular context, especially if they have family dependants may well not be the right choice that Jesus makes in his particular context. But a choice has to be made nonetheless. A sympathetic Pharisee warns his Lord that Herod is on the war path and is out for his blood. Jesus' right choice is to stay because if he runs away now, he runs away from the Cross and the gift of eternal life that will be bequeathed upon the world at his resurrection. And in making that choice, Jesus shows tremendous courage as ultimately he is thinking of others.

Furthermore, as he laments that which lies ahead, he is sad not for that which will befall him but for the people whose minds will be turned away from the love which he sought to share upon them, turned away from imitating his words and his actions, to such hatred that they will end up baying for his destruction.

Lent, being one of the two main penitential seasons of the church's year, is a time when each of us can examine afresh the choices that we have made, are currently making, and may possibly make in the future. Have they been bad choices or good choices? I guess if we are honest with ourselves, they will probably have been, and may well be, a mixture of the two. To help us in making good choices, it is absolutely essential that our choices are underpinned by a moral code that is generally accepted across the world. For Christians this is based on what I like to call the moral trinity of 'Love God, love neighbour, respects oneself based on Jesus' summary of the Ten Commandments. This naturally flows from the Holy Trinity in which God the Father God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are held together in perfect loving. But lest we forget, **perfect loving is underpinned by perfect justice**. That's why the situation in Ukraine, as with other areas of fighting throughout the world, has unsettled all of us. The fundamental challenge for each of us, but most especially for our leaders, is how justice can once again be re-established in a grossly unjust situation. **There are times when we have to act**, when the robbers in the Parable of The Good Samaritan have to be tackled head on. On one occasion even Jesus felt compelled to throw out the money changers from the Temple.