

Pastoral Letter – East Anglia District

Chair of the District - Revd. Julian M. Pursehouse

March 2022

Dear Friends,

I am writing this letter with a heavy heart at the beginning of the Season of Lent not least because we are witnessing a truly awful and sickening act of terror in the heart of Europe. Russia has invaded the sovereign territory of Ukraine and has subjected its citizens to a wretched life of aerial bombardment and mortal danger on a daily basis. We need to truthfully state that this is not a mere *military operation* – it is an *unlawful act of war* by a cruel and calculating regime under the iron grip of a modern-day dictator! As the days have passed by, I have found myself pondering what our response should be; particularly when we hear about the level of human suffering and misery. Just the other day we were reminded of the desperate plight of the residents of Mariupol on the Black Sea Coast – the vulnerable and elderly reduced to drinking snow water and cooking with open fires outside in bitter winter temperatures whilst thermobaric munitions wreak terrible carnage in a maternity hospital.

In the face of such unspeakable atrocities, we must speak truth to power and name these things for what they are. The prologue of John's Gospel reminds us that the incarnate Son of God came amongst us and revealed the glory of God through ministering grace and truth. (John 1:14) Truth matters - even though from time to time, the rulers of the nation's pretend otherwise or puzzle over its definition and pretend that truth is malleable and open to manipulation to suit personal agendas. Witness the quizzical question of Pilate to Jesus during his trial 'What is truth'? (John 18:37). I hope and pray that as people of faith we will find the courage to speak truthfully about what is happening and call out acts of terror and cruelty that ultimately demean the dignity of our common humanity. I also hope that we will find the courage to challenge the British government about whether it has the willingness to be more hospitable to Ukrainian refugees and to be more truthful about what we can do to offer compassionate hospitality.

In the light of this unfolding misery, I also hope that we will find the courage to pray and *not* lose hope. There is a temptation to see these things as so horrific and overbearing that prayer can feel like a meaningless act or an impotent gesture of escapism. In contrast Jesus teaches his disciples always to pray and the Apostle Paul advocates a life of 'unceasing prayer' and John Wesley the founder of Methodism suggested that 'God does nothing but in answer to prayer'. Sometimes in moments of prayerful reflection we can find ourselves so overcome by the enormity of what we are contemplating that we are left with empty silence, where words can no longer be uttered – this is not the silence of doubt or the absence of faith – but the silence of God at the heart of our being where words no longer matter and the Spirit intercedes in and through our being as those who are in union with Christ. At these moments we are at one with God who contains all things in heaven and on earth.

The author and poet, Janet Morley reminds us that the season of Lent is 'the heart's time' and for those who embrace the Christian faith it is a solemn season for prayer, reflection, and the renewal of spirituality in conformity to the suffering and rising of Christ. If indeed this is 'the heart's time' we cannot ignore the hearts that are breaking and suffering under the iron rod of bloody conflict – our hearts are fused with the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Ukraine who need our love, our prayers, our truthful solidarity, and our practical aid in the struggle for freedom and life in all its fullness!

With peace and blessing,

Julian