

Third Sunday of Lent 2020

Readings: Isaiah 55, 1-9; Psalm 63, 1-9; 1 Cor. 10,1-13; Luke 13, 1-9

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without price. Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Why indeed?

We tend to think of Lent as a rather grim and gloomy season, concentrating on self-sacrifice, or at least self-denial; and making us feel guilty if we don't manage to keep to our very modest resolutions. And it's true that our readings this morning do have an element of threat. Just one example: about those 18 people killed when a tower collapsed on them – No, they weren't more sinful than anyone else, *'but unless you repent, you will perish just like them.'* At the same time, all these passages contain a message of hope, of forgiveness, of God's benevolence: 'return to the Lord, that he may have mercy, to our God, that he will abundantly pardon.' God does give free wine and milk, which St Paul interprets in a spiritual sense, a sacramental sense. But he also warns: for any follower of Jesus, don't think taking the sacraments can be a substitute for the virtuous life!

The very mention of a tower falling and killing people is a disturbing reminder of what's happening now. I've heard more than once the complaint that seeing all this terrible destruction and slaughter and grief on the news is seriously bad for us. 'I turn the news off now, it's all so horrific and I can't do anything about it'; 'It gives me bad dreams', and so on. I have great sympathy for that, and we must decide our own limits for ourselves. But if we can take it without growing de-sensitized to so much outrage and suffering, I think it is important to be aware of what the atrocities leave in their wake, and see what a terrible toll is being taken for such little gain. As in war generally, it brings out both the best and the worst in humanity.

Seeing those news shots, and then, on Friday evening, that packed and glitzy arena of cheering Russians, adoring their Great Leader like a pop-star, and totally taken in by the big lie that Ukrainians started it all and posed a threat to Russia! Well, not all are taken in, but any critics had to be unseen on camera when they spoke... the contrast was obscene. And the mad irony of Putin speaking about the de-nazifying of Ukraine, when that whole, carefully staged set-up was an uncanny reminder of the infamous Hitler rallies of the 1930's. The message was made clear: anyone with doubts about the current war is not only 'scum', but actually 'a traitor'.

Meanwhile, one over-enthusiastic supporter actually compared Putin to a god! In the absence of a more transcendent 'higher power' the all-too-human ruler has to do – everything he says or does is right, by definition. And when the only 'heaven' is the human-made state, and to question it is to be branded a traitor, we are on dangerous ground. Excessive, *absolute* patriotism cannot claim a place in Christianity. But the distinction between that and healthy patriotism can be a fine one, and I find that much-

loved hymn 'I vow to thee my country' shows up the knife-edge helpfully. Let's just look at what it says. To start with, just the opening lines...

'I vow to thee my country, all earthly things above' [Good, the patriotic vow is above all *earthly* things, not above *all* things. It's relative, not absolute.]

'Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love' [well, that's a bit tricky, claiming such perfection, especially in war, where extremes of good and evil get blurred, where brave fighters have to become de-humanized at times, in order to survive, to kill or be killed...]

'The love that asks no questions' [This one really concerns me. *Of course* there are times (and particular questions) that are totally out of order, like in the midst of battle. But more generally, questioning is such a good way of learning; it can save us from blundering on thoughtless; it can show up inadequacy of those in power, like the lies told to the Russian soldiers, that they were there to protect the Ukrainian people!]

But just when the hymn seems to be letting us down, everything changes as we move into verse 2. 'And there's another country I've heard of long ago...' Yes; and maybe we should all be more aware of that other country more of the time.

This really opens the way for the good side of patriotism, while acknowledging that vows to one's country are important, but relative. The only absolute commitment is to God; he holds all our intentions, good and bad, and mercifully gives us the benefit of any in doubt.

And of course, there is that wonderful tune to lift the spirits.

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