

Normally this would be a pretty ordinary first Sunday in Lent, the sort on which I've preached a dozen or so times in the last twenty years, mostly on that reading from Luke. It would have been a sermon about self-discipline, or deepening your spiritual life, or resolving to do something differently. Last year on Ash Wednesday I suggested that as we'd already been forced to give up so much we could perhaps do something to make ourselves feel a bit better. All those sermons were well-meant and honestly spoken. But what about this year, when we find ourselves ten days into the biggest tragedy and the greatest danger we in Europe have faced since the 1940s? How can I go on about giving up my sherry before lunch, or taking more exercise, or even promising to read all the psalms set for Evening Prayer (not just the ones in bold in the lectionary), when it all seems completely meaningless? How dare I piously suggest a range of petty privations when people are being slaughtered and cities annihilated less than fifteen hundred miles away? Just a day's drive by car, according to Google, which helpfully provided a map showing all the roadworks en route but omitting the war zones.

Something about that first paragraph made me stop and think. '...the greatest danger we in Europe have faced.' Yes, it is – in Europe. But we forget that there is still a deadly war in Yemen. There is a Uighur genocide in Xinjiang, and Rohingya people are still being exterminated in Myanmar. There is oppression, violence and famine in Afghanistan. The population of North Korea starves under a draconian military regime so that Kim Jong-un can increase his nuclear arsenal. All this and many other horrors have been in progress for years. Occasionally when something particularly nasty happens, one or other finds its way back into the headlines. And speaking of headlines, did anyone else wince a couple of days ago when the BBC News website gave equal prominence to the bombardment of Kharkiv and the end of 'Neighbours'?

Every one of these atrocities results from the same cause. Someone is, metaphorically, sitting on a mountain-top surveying all the kingdoms of the world and believing that they can have them. It is their right to get what they deserve, to have what they are entitled to because they are of a superior intelligence, a superior ideology, a superior race, a superior religion. All they have to do is to worship the devil. And then we see what devil-worship looks like: violence, carnage, oppression, terrorism, famine, fear, flight. I've never believed in the devil as an actual being, probably black with horns and a tail, but there is something out there which is pure evil, which insinuates itself into minds and hearts. It affects reason to the extent that eventually it appears justified, right, even laudable, to carry out these appalling acts and even to believe that others will welcome what is happening to them and be grateful for it.

There is always a leader, the one who has sold his soul to the devil, but they are never alone. Others also crave power, influence, wealth and status, and will line up behind the person who can distribute it. They may not have been to the mountain-top, but evil is infectious and it festers in them too. They know they are right but fear they are hated, so they take elaborate precautions and build complex networks to protect their regime. It becomes increasingly difficult for their subjects – victims – the people subjected to their manipulations and cruelties – to live free, open lives. Ultimately whole communities, entire nations, complete cultures are offered up as a tribute to the forces of evil.

It is inconceivable that Putin, who presents himself as a faithful Christian and is regularly seen attending church services, can believe that what he is doing can have God's blessing. But that is how deeply evil can enter into a soul. It is equally unbelievable that Patriarch Kirill, leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, has lined up behind Putin to endorse the war in Ukraine. But the church has had much of its

property and buildings restored to it since the fall of communism, and Kirill has decided that status, influence and power come from Putin, not from God. What a tragic mockery of those faithful souls who kept Christianity alive for decades in the gulags and clandestine house churches.

Maybe the West could have behaved differently over the last thirty years. Maybe NATO could have been more circumspect in encouraging new members. Maybe we should have learned the lessons of Russian destruction in Chechnya and Syria. Maybe we still think naively that a ceasefire means that people stop shooting at each other. Maybe we should not have assumed that because we, on the whole, do not massacre our opponents into submission, nobody else would do so either. But whatever the political niceties, what Putin is doing now is pure evil.

God has given all his people free will. That means we make choices. Some people make spectacularly bad choices, limiting the options available to others and eventually depriving them of the ability to make any choices at all. But they can never completely control someone's mind and soul, unless that person consents to it. The Christians imprisoned in the gulags were cut off from any vestiges of civilisation, but they were not cut off from God. They could do nothing to improve their situation, but they could pray. We are not physically imprisoned, but most of us can do nothing which will directly help the Uighurs, the Rohingyas or the North Koreans. But we can be openly outraged that these atrocities exist. We can make our anger known through whatever channels seem most effective. We can support the humanitarian relief agencies. We can pray.

Ukraine feels more immediate and more threatening. It is much closer, and its people seem more like us. It is easier to empathise, but we can still feel powerless. We are not. We can protest to our government and demand that it takes effective actions to protect and save lives. We can pray. Pray for peace. Pray for justice and mercy. Pray for the frightened, the besieged, the injured and the refugees. Pray for the men and women brave enough to fight for freedom, and for Russian soldiers who do not understand why they are there. Above all, pray for the overthrow of evil. Pray for the devil to be cast down and for wicked hearts and minds to face reality. Pray as if lives depend on our prayers. Some do, and ours might.