

GOOD FRIDAY 2022

The prophet Isaiah 52. 13 - 53. 12

Psalm 22

The letter to the Hebrews 4. 14-16, 5. 7-9

Luke: 22. 39 – 23. 56

What we do today is we willingly sit with and hear a very difficult story. Not simply because it is the story of the betrayal, abandonment and killing of the Word made flesh but because it is also a very everyday human story of betrayal, abandonment and killing. In our hyper-fast, digitally connected world events like the Passion are on our phones and other devices, almost before they are over. We are now constantly exposed to stories of human horror. But this story of God's Christ, God's anointed one goes to the very foundation of our human capacity to subject each other to terror; and in some way the Passion asks us why? *Why, what has my Lord done* we will sing shortly.

I have to say that one part of the passion I have always found difficult to believe is the behaviour of the religious leadership in the push for Jesus to be crucified. Their behaviour has in many ways the feeling of a melodrama; a bit over the top, over-acted, normally serious characters coated with a layer of parody.

I thought this until the invasion of Ukraine and news of the propaganda machine which is working overtime in Russia to sell the special military operation – as they are calling it – to the Russian people and to filter out the truth of what is taking place in Ukraine.

I have always thought the portrayal of the religious leadership in the Passion as a kind of fiction, a parody until now. But because of the way the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox church is supporting and adding theological legitimacy to Putin's atrocities in Ukraine I see the same thing happening in our own time as is recorded by the Gospel writers. Patriarch Kirill has described Putin's leadership as a religious miracle. Last month in a sermon he portrayed the invasion of Ukraine as a metaphysical struggle – a kind of cosmic struggle - against the decadent west – a society which he says has given in to materialism, to moral relativism, to globalisation and homosexuality. In saying these things, he has lent legitimacy to Putin's oppressive tactics and attempted to give divine justification to the sort of destruction we have rarely seen since WWII.

Kirill is regularly photographed embracing and kissing Putin – in traditional Russian fashion – echoing the attempt by Judas to betray Jesus with a kiss. *Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?* With his kiss Kirill betrays the Ukrainian people and makes a mockery of the Passion which the church, one holy, catholic and apostolic reads today with great ceremony and dignity. Kirill's fellow patriarchs have implored him to distance himself from Putin, The Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew 1, last week condemned the invasion as an atrocious act. The WCC have urged Kirill to intervene with Putin to put an end to the invasion. To no avail.

What is this abandonment of the Gospel? What is this cosy, cheek to cheek dance with a dictator? Luke tells us that after Jesus is sent from Pilate to the murderous Herod and back again that the two, who had been enemies, became friends. My enemy's enemy has become my friend.

We can see that the machinations of what takes place in the passion is not parody, is not fiction. It is very real. It is a mix of authoritarianism, fragile, bristling national identity and religion - a toxic mix in Jesus' time, a toxic mix in our own time.

Into this mix Jesus inserts himself – very purposefully. He knows if he goes there how it will end. We witness Jesus undergoing a cosmic struggle as he prays in the garden, as his sweat becomes like great drops of blood. From Galilee where he began, even to this place Jesus has made steady progress to Jerusalem and is repeatedly clear with the disciples of the grizzly fate which awaits him. We might describe it that Jesus is destined – destined by God – to undergo these things. But he understands that the cosmic struggle takes place in all of us as we are provoked to choose – between baying with the crowd or standing alone, as he does. The path to resurrection is personal. It's not something the crowd chooses or indeed may undergo. Resurrection comes through the personal call as we each take up our own cross and follow. It comes to us each in our own way. As Jesus cries *take this cup*, so will we. This is not failure. This is not cowardice, this is the path of being human, knowing that we are made in the divine image and yet to be human is to be fragile, to doubt, to fear - but to not be shaped, nor driven by these. This is the calling toward resurrection.

As we ponder the Passion between now and Sunday may this story have its way with us, transforming us into Christ's image, that we might also be brought to glory and be called children of God.

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