

Easter 3 / 4 – The Extent of God’s Love

Acts 9 vv 36-43 p1103, John 10 vv 22-30 p1077

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also must I bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd.

A few years ago, I saw an exhibition in a church at Faversham of photographs of young men on their way to fight in the First World War. I found myself unexpectedly moved by these pictures. They looked just like us, similarly dressed, probably having lived lives not too dissimilar to our own. They could have been my grandfathers. They weren't, but it's not impossible that they were relatives, given that, as far as I know, we've lived in Kent for generations. So these young men, just like me when I was their age, were setting off to the horrors of war. Extremely thought-provoking.

It did occur to me at the time that I was more moved by these pictures than I generally am by depictions of war, whether of wars which took place much longer ago than the Great War or of wars going on in the world today but in distant climes. The participants don't look like us. They are dressed differently. The landscape in which they are fighting is foreign to us. They speak different languages, inhabit other cultures, are of different ethnicities. All war is terrible and we pray desperately for peace throughout the world. *O GOD, the Creator and Preserver of all mankind, we humbly beseech thee for all sorts and conditions of men: that thou wouldest be pleased to make thy ways known unto them, thy saving health unto all nations.* Yet I did feel more keenly the horror of these young men from Faversham going to fight in a war of which many of the people among whom I grew up had personal memories than I feel about depictions of conflicts which are more remote in terms of time or place. I surprised myself and I think I was slightly ashamed of myself.

I was reminded of all this last February when Russia invaded Ukraine. In fact, a journalist in the Times made a similar point. We are rightly outraged by the barbarities being inflicted on the Ukrainian people. Millions of us have contributed to charities with a view to relieving the suffering caused by the conflict. Most of us, probably, are cheering the Ukrainians on. I know that I am. We support non-lethal sanctions against Russia. There are differences of opinion about supporting the Ukrainians with weaponry or even fighting alongside them. How far can we go without precipitating a wider conflict, perhaps one with even more dreadful weapons? Nevertheless, some British people have gone to fight with the Ukrainian forces. We are generally supportive of our government's efforts to sustain the Ukrainian fighting forces and to supply them with the equipment which a very plucky people need in order to defend their homeland. Most of Europe, the United States of America and many others of our allies around the world are taking similar positions.

This is all well and good and I'm pleased that the world has responded as it has to Putin's utterly unjustifiable act of aggression. But, as the Times article reminded us, even worse atrocities have been committed in Syria and Chechnya by Russian forces and by other armies in other parts of the world. The Taliban in Afghanistan, the regimes in Iran and China, China's threat to Taiwan, the dreadful civil war in Yemen – with one side aided and abetted by our allies the Saudi Arabians – seem to trouble us much less. I am not saying that they do not trouble us at all, just that they trouble us less. We are much more willing to take in refugees from Ukraine than from Syria or Afghanistan.

I think this is partly because Putin's invasion of Ukraine obviously represents a greater threat to us. If Russia successfully conquers Ukraine, other countries in Europe, our allies, could very well be next in Putin's sights. There is also anxiety that some of the refugees from places like Syria might be criminals or even terrorists, though it is obviously unfair to distrust whole communities or races because some of their compatriots have proved to be bad people. I'm sure the main reason, however, for our caring more about Ukraine than people caught up in other conflicts in other parts of the world is that they are people more like us. They are Europeans. They have a Christian heritage. They share a common western culture. We feel an affinity, a kinship with Ukrainians which perhaps we do not with people of very different cultures and beliefs.

We are right to support the Ukrainians. We are right to try to relieve their suffering. We are right to welcome Ukrainian refugees. I believe that we are right to support their resistance. All this, of course, without hating the Russians and with a view to bringing about a just peace rather than the total destruction or humiliation of either side.

But what about the other people caught up in conflict in the world today, in Syria and Yemen, in Ethiopia and the Sudan and Somalia? What about the oppressed in China and Iran and in so many parts of the world? Don't we care about them too? As we raise money for Ukraine, do we forget about poor people in other countries such as Zimbabwe? When we make up parcels of food and clothing for Ukrainian refugees do we forget about poor people in this country who depend on foodbanks and other charities?

To some extent, praying and thinking about Ukraine has reminded me to pray for some of these other places in the world where there is conflict, oppression or grinding poverty.

Charity does begin at home. It is natural to care first for our families and for our own people. St Paul says to Christians (Galatians 6¹⁰), *As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.* Look after our own people and then look after others. But he also says of God (Acts 17), *he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;*²⁶ *And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;*²⁷ *That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:*²⁸ *For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.* We are all of one blood. All nations are of one blood. We are all one family. God has made us all – English, Ukrainians, Syrians, Somalians, Russians, Iranians, Chinese, people of all nations. We are all the children of God. Charity begins at home. The earth is our home. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says, *And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also must I bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd.* We all belong to Him, whoever we are. And on that last day, the people of God will be revealed to be a great multitude, which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, standing before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands. Such must be the breadth of our vision, the extent of our love.