



WHEN YOU HEAR THIS, LIFT UP YOUR HEADS

A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from the Bishop of St Asaph

March 13th 2022

The words inscribed above come from chapter 21 of the Gospel according to Luke. Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the end times, about the convulsions which he predicts before God finally intervenes to wrap up the story of the human world. Jesus warns us that there will be wars, and the rumour of wars, and much to cause distress and worry. Of course, ever since, members of the Church have seen themselves throughout history as living in the last times. The first millennium, the crusades, the invasion of the Mongols, the Black Death, the First World War and the Second have all been hailed by one prophet or another as a sign that the Second Coming is just around the corner.

Our grandparents knew what it was to live with the growing threat of war, and although we have lived through wars – the Falklands Conflict, the Invasion of Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan – we have not, as a society, been touched in recent years by the sense that war is on our doorstep. All that changed two weeks ago, when the President of Russia ordered an invasion of a neighbouring country simply on the grounds that he personally felt that Ukraine should be reintegrated into Mother Russia. We knew the sort of man that Vladimir Putin was. He invaded Chechnya, and we looked on dumbfounded. In 2008, he invaded Georgia, detached two Provinces in an eerily parallel process, and we barely murmured. He administered dangerous poisons to his enemies in our own country without significant consequences. His brutal methods of war have been duplicated in Syria and elsewhere, and it remains to be seen how far he will go in the subjugation of Ukraine.

For the leaders of the rest of the world there is a very painful decision. How far do we sit back and watch the destruction of a sovereign free and democratic country, or respond to an ever deepening crisis with ever stronger sanctions until the line between expressing disapproval and actually entering upon military action is so confused that Putin decides that he is at war with NATO? A friend of mine sombrely commented that we in the West are scared of provoking World War III, when in fact, it has already begun.

What can we do in such a situation? We can ensure that we are well briefed and knowledgeable so that when we can or have to add to public comment and debate, we do so sensibly and in an informed way. We can offer practical support to Ukraine, by financial or charitable donations and activity. We can urge resolve upon our politicians and leaders that our nations support action to defend our values and to enable the defence of Ukraine. We can find ways to shelter the needy and those dispossessed by war, especially if refugees make their way as far as north Wales.

As people of faith, we can reach out to fellow believers in Ukraine and Russia to make our voice heard, and to strengthen the hearts of those who work for peace. And, as Jesus commended, we can lift up our heads and anticipate God's activity. In some ways, to pray seems such a weak response – Napoleon is reputed to have said of the Pope "And how many battalions does he command?" – and yet, if we do believe in a sovereign God, we must also believe that his Spirit is at work.

What might we expect as answers to our prayer? Perhaps not miracles: Putin will still advance, and in the rest of the world we are not absolved of our responsibility to offer aid to Ukraine and practical action. However, I do believe that the Spirit can be at work to give courage, hope and resilience; working to turn the hearts of those set upon violence, subtly to change the dynamics of the situation. Ukraine has already defied the odds in this war, and developments may yet surprise us. That, in part, I believe, will be as a result of the Spirit at work, and not just the grim outworking of human effort.

Prayer is a mystery, and God's action inscrutable – but the Bible teaches us to join in with the work of the Spirit by expressing our needs in prayer, and to lift our heads in anticipation of his redemption.

