

## What are we to do in a time of war?

St. Brandon's

Luke 13:31-end

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"So long as you're all all right" is an expression my Mum uses towards the end of our regular phone calls, after I've updated her on the family. "So long as you're all all right". But I'm going to suggest this morning that my Mum is wrong (though I shan't tell her!), and that none of us is ever "all right". And in doing so, and the link may not be at all obvious, I'm going to try to say something about the war in Ukraine, and how we might respond to it. But to do all that, we need to start with our rather difficult gospel passage.

Jesus had already predicted His death and resurrection way back in Luke 9 (21-22) after Peter had declared that He was "The Messiah of God". So when some Pharisees for whatever reason (and there could be many ranging from genuine concern to trying to scare Jesus off), tell Jesus that Herod is out to kill Him, Jesus would hardly have been surprised. But His response is to refer to "today, tomorrow and the third day", a phrase He repeats and links the second time to His impending death in Jerusalem – the place where prophets have to be killed. For Jerusalem is "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!".

What are we to make of this? Well, we know of course about Jesus's saving work through His death and resurrection. But here He is making it clear that His death will be one (though actually in one sense the culmination) of a long line of such deaths. He is pointing to a history of violence and oppression, and often state-sponsored and / or religiously-oriented violence and oppression, both against individual prophets and those sent by God, but also against what they stood for. And while Jesus's death and resurrection were intended both to reveal the way of the world to the world, and thereby to do away with it, He did not promise that the world would change overnight. Indeed, a little later in Luke's gospel He says, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues" (21:11). This is the continuing way of the world.

But in our gospel reading Jesus then offers another perspective: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" It seems that Jesus is speaking here as the eternal Son of God, with a perspective, as it were, from all eternity. And although he refers to the apparently impersonal "Jerusalem", His reference to Jerusalem's "children" indicates that He is thinking of the people in it. And, indeed, if Jerusalem stands for the violent ways of the world, so here we can take Jesus's words as referring to God's motherly longing, care and protection for all His / Her children (which is everyone), and, I think, legitimately by extension for all His / Her creation (see Romans 8:22-23).

So we have contrasted here the violent and oppressive ways of the world, and the motherly longing, care and protection of God. And we have, between these two, Jesus's prediction of His own death and resurrection, "today and tomorrow, and on the third day", by which the violent and oppressive ways of the world will be overcome, and the longing and care and protection of God for all His creation will be established.

So how does all of that relate to the war in Ukraine, and our response to it? Well, let me take you back to a sermon that C. S. Lewis preached in Oxford in December 1939, as German tanks rolled across Europe, a sermon entitled “Learning in War-Time”.<sup>1</sup> He said this: “The war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself.” Just as then, so now the war in Ukraine, creates no absolutely new situation. But saying that is not in any way to understate the monstrous evil that is being meted out by the Russian invasion, the tyrant’s fist crushing and closing on a nation’s freedom. Nor is it to underestimate the immense tragedy of human lives lost and shattered on both sides. But it is to acknowledge this as one more example of the way of the world, as nation rises against nation.

What, then, of our response? Yes, of course, to praying for a resolution. Yes, of course, to giving towards the humanitarian relief effort. Yes, perhaps, to offering our homes to refugees – Ukrainian, Syrian, Afghan and so on. But beyond that, if you are anything like me, I am tempted just to shrug my shoulders, get on with *my* life and, if anything, to eat, drink and try to be merry. This is the way of the world, but it’s not very close to me, so what’s the point of doing anything else, or indeed what’s the point of anything at all? I’m not “all right”, everyone is not “all right”, everything is not “all right”. But then again, it never was and it never will be, so I might as well just enjoy myself while I can. There is, you’ll realise, a genuine air of resignation, indeed almost abdication in my response, and it relates not just to the war in Ukraine but to climate change, racial, social and economic injustice and so on. Why bother?

C. S. Lewis put this rather better in relation to just getting on with our ordinary everyday lives in a situation such as this, but he raised it as a critical question: “Why should we – indeed how can we – continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?”.

But his answer to this, at its core, is a call to do everything as on a precipice, to do anything only because it is intrinsically worth doing, all the more so because it might always be the last thing we do, and to do all of this, all “our merely natural activities” to the glory of God. So do your homework, do your day-job, do your volunteering activities; make peace, make music, make love (all of these come with “... where appropriate”!); keep gardening, keep fit, just keep going; defend truth, defend freedom, defend a city – do all these and more to the glory of God.

It is, in the terms of our gospel reading, to hold on to the other truth that is contrasted there with the way of the world – the truth of the motherly longing and care and protection of God. It is also to stake our faith in the work of Christ, in His death and resurrection, today and tomorrow and on the third day, by which the violent and oppressive ways of the world will be overcome, and the longing and care and protection of God will be established.

We are at liberty for now, praise God, to continue with our “placid occupations”, our ordinary everyday lives. But in doing so, and in doing so in everything we do to the glory of God, we are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bradleyggreen.com/attachments/Lewis.Learning%20in%20War-Time.pdf>. I was alerted to this by Malcolm Guite’s piece in the *Church Times* of 4 March, and I also use some of his material: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/4-march/comment/columnists/malcolm-guite-poet-s-corner>.

thereby resisting the ways of the world, and pointing to and even helping to bring about the ultimate truth of God's longing and care and protection for all creation, and in the process witnessing to the redeeming and reconciling work of Christ. And, difficult as it may be, we do it in the sure hope that, in the end, everyone and everything will be "all right".

Amen.