

NOW I TELL YOU EVEN WITH TEARS

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Coventry Cathedral, Corrymeela Sunday

13 March 2022

It is the passage from *Philippians* that I want to dwell on today. There is a line in it that seems particularly apt. Paul writes, ‘now I tell you even with tears.’ I have been waiting to tell you something, anything, in this space for two years – and now I can, finally, even with tears. The last minute cancellation of my visit to Coventry in 2020 was the first experience I had of adjusting my life to this thing they were calling the coronavirus. Were we being overly cautious in refraining from ‘unnecessary travel’ when we couldn’t yet see the effects of this supposed pandemic? Would a recording of my sermon suffice? You seem to have survived the disappointment of my absence. And a year later, still unable to travel we had become somewhat adept at online worship, and so not just my voice but also my face was with you. Not necessarily an improvement.

As we gather today in the flesh and also online and two years in to this prolonged trauma, I am struck by how many tears we have shed in the intervening period. Tears from the loss of loved ones, from the pain of extended separation, tears from the stress of trying to stretch ourselves passed the point of breaking, tears of helplessness as we watch the news, tears of exhaustion from being in a heightened state of anxiety for far too long. *Now I tell you even with tears.*

And although it is safer to travel at the moment, and to be with you physically on this Corrymeela Sunday, the reason for gathering – the reason for highlighting our work of peace and reconciliation, the reason for maintaining these ties within the Community of the Cross of Nails, seems far less abstract than it may have two years ago. Europe is at war. Cities the size of Coventry and Dresden and Belfast are being destroyed. Our human madness has been unleashed again, and so the message of Christ, the message of love, grace and (yes) forgiveness needs told, now, even with tears.

Their God is the Belly

I don’t think Paul had Vladimir Putin in mind when he wrote his letter to the Philippians, but his description of the enemies of the cross seems timely: ‘their end is destruction, their god is the belly, their glory is in their shame.’ There is almost a cartoonish villainy in Putin’s use of lies to justify naked aggression, his indiscriminate targeting of civilians, his ‘might makes right’ world view, the brutal imposition of whatever he declares is the truth. I am struck as I stand in this place that the grace we extend as we cry out ‘Father, forgive’ – and echo Jesus’ prayer for our enemies and for ourselves – that the implicit part in the second half of that verse about ignorance is harder to say in this context. Father, Forgive. But does Putin really ‘not know’ what he is doing? ‘They know not what they do’ may seem apt for the Russian people and even for the Russian soldiers, but not for those whose end is clearly destruction, whose god is an appetite for more power and more land and more glory – whose actions and words show how shameless they are.

Father, forgive. I’m bringing coals to Newcastle here when I bring a message of forgiveness to Coventry. I realise that. So please know that I’m preaching what I myself need to hear. And you’re indulging me. But in my mind Coventry is a place where the Gospel of Christ lives in the transformation through war of the prayer ‘Father, forgive them – they know not what they do’ – to ‘Father, forgive’ for we know all too well what it is we do.

In the context of such brutality and in the face of such evil, it is easy once again to create a narrative of good guys and bad guys. It is right to condemn this war and to stand in solidarity with the victims on both sides of the conflict. We need to name the crimes that the Russian regime is committing. The tears we have for the people of Ukraine are tears of helplessness, and tears of empathy for innocent victims of a war of choice. The horrors we can see for moments at a time and then look away are nothing compared to reality that has become a hell for millions and millions these last few weeks. Their tears, our tears can become tears of anger; the unjustified killing of people can quickly turn into justification for revenge.

But as we have learned in the retaliatory bombing of Dresden, and in the tribal warfare of Northern Ireland, as we continue to see in our patterns of sectarianism, racism, nationalism, colonialism, misogyny and transphobia – too often our global system is about gaining and maintaining the power to protect ourselves and to subject others to what we would call justice. Is the sin of Putin's aggression not the logical end to a broken human system that rewards greed and the skills necessary to play a zero-sum game? Is this imperial impulse on display right now not the norm of human history, and the relative peace and geopolitical stability we have enjoyed for a few decades in Europe not the aberration? The work of peace is constant work because the twisted impulse within humans is a selfish one – born of fear and insecurity. We are prone to protect our own, to impose our will on others, and to demand our preferred version of the truth.

Body of Humiliation, Body of Glory

A clarity has come these past few weeks. There has been an almost apocalyptic unveiling not only of how wrong this war is – but how broken we still are. How dependent we have become on cheap and dirty goods despite the moral and ecological cost. How intertwined we have become with oligarchic money. How quick we are to respond to the plight of refugees if they look like us. And also: how interdependent we are on one another – even those to whom we thought we could be indifferent. And also: what strength we find when we are led by our best values. What heroism we can unearth in a place like Kyiv when we are willing to make sacrifices to save others. What generosity can be garnered when we open our borders and homes to those in need. What restraint we can show when we resist the impulse to tar the Russian people with the brush we would use to mark the tyranny of one man. This is what Paul was talking about when he implored the Philippians and us to imitate the way of Christ, the way of selfless love, grace and forgiveness – to stop setting our minds on earthly things, but to allow our body of humiliation to be transformed into Christ's body of glory – as we resist the impulse to divide.

Amanda Gorman, the American poet, put out a tweet in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She reminded us that *'There is no such thing as gentle war. There is no peace that can't be flung aside. Our only enemy is that which would make us enemies to each other.'*

What brings us together (at last) this Corrymeela Sunday is the same truth that would have brought us together two years ago, or last year. It is the fact that people connected with Coventry Cathedral and people connected with the Corrymeela Community caught a glimpse of this unveiled reality. Our world is broken. And what has broken it is our common human impulse—born of fear – to divide ourselves into us and them, good and bad, to separate ourselves from those we would deem lesser and less good so that we can pretend we are more like God.

And what holds us together, what allows us to see that madness as sin and to carry on with a message of hope even with tears is the good news that there is a different way to live. A life born not of fear but in assurance that the God of selfless love – not the god of the belly -- is with us. That ours is a life that leads not ultimately to destruction, nor to the endless extraction of more and more for the most belligerent – but to a life of abundance and peace in community.

The earthly humiliation of ours can be transformed into glory when we recognise our interdependence on each other – when we find the strength and resilience that comes in standing in solidarity with the most vulnerable *and* with those we would call enemy. When we imitate Christ as best we can, we echo even now with tears, the tears of COVID exhaustion, the tears of compounding loss, the tears of righteous anger in the face of war, the tears of prolonged anxiety in this weary world, his words – his life giving liberating words – that are as much for us as for anyone.

Father, forgive.

In the name of the Creator, and the Christ and the Holy Spirit: one God. Amen.