

Dear Friend

I imagine you have been as shocked as I have by the stories coming out of Ukraine of innocent civilians being apparently killed in cold blood by retreating Russian soldiers. Proper and thorough investigations will need to be carried out, but from what we have seen and heard as reported by the media, it does look as though the Russian forces are guilty of war crimes. The crucial question that any future enquiry will be asking is: where does the responsibility for these actions lie? Who gave the orders? It may take many months after the ending of hostilities before those questions are answered, and the whole truth may never be known. In the meantime, the world looks on appalled and disgusted as leaders wonder what more can be done to deter Russia from continuing its brutal campaign.

Our faith is certainly being tested at this time. How can people who share so much in common, in their history, culture and values, end up having such enmity toward one another? Hatred spawns violence which leads to yet more hatred. It would not be surprising to discover in the end that atrocities have been committed on both sides. War is brutal and sadly can turn ordinary people into brutes capable of the most appalling actions. Is there an answer? Can the vicious cycle of ever-increasing evil be broken? Love seems to be powerless in the face of aggression that has in its hands guns and tanks - or even weapons of mass destruction. Does our faith in a loving God have an answer?

The only answer is the Cross of Christ. Here we see the powerlessness of love. Here God surrenders himself and allows evil to do its worst. Here innocent blood is shed. Here we see humanity at its worst - destroying the very source of life itself. Of course we know that the death of Jesus was not the end, but it is the cross rather than the resurrection that is God's answer to evil - in whatever form that takes. It is at the cross that evil is both confronted and overcome. Far from destroying the source of life, Life destroys every force of evil. To an onlooker on that first Good Friday, as Jesus' lifeless body is taken down from the cross and wrapped in cloths and laid in the tomb, death seems to have won. The truth is in fact the opposite. In surrendering to death, God defeats it on our behalf. No one's death is either meaningless or left without an answer. The suffering and pain that is being experienced by the people of Ukraine is being felt in the very heart of God. The pain and suffering of the cross of Christ is still being experienced as our loving God embraces the suffering of the world. Love may appear to be powerless but in truth love will win through and every evil act, every crime committed in the heat of battle or in cold calculation, will have to answer to love - the love of God.

As we stand alongside those who are suffering, as best we can sharing their grief and sorrows, it is the heart of Jesus which is breaking, and which we need to experience. And as Jesus Christ is lifted up on the cross at Calvary, he is drawing the whole world - saints and sinners alike - to himself so that he might heal the wounds of war, hatred and violence, and at long last, bring wholeness to our broken world.

Easter is the ultimate answer, and I do hope you will be able to make the journey with us from Palm Sunday, through Holy Week to the glorious triumph of Easter Day, when tears of sorrow are turned to joy.

With my love and prayers

Simon