

Homily 2022.02.27 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

We celebrate this Mass as war has erupted on the eastern borders of Europe. And we celebrate this Mass with last Sunday's gospel still hanging in the air: 'Love your enemies...pray for those who treat you badly'. How shall we make a Christian response, then, to the unspeakable violence now being visited on the people of Ukraine?

Firstly, our prayer is for the victims, especially vulnerable civilians, but also those who are defending their country and way of life against unprovoked and naked aggression. Self-defence, and the defence of the innocent, as a moral choice, should be proportionate to the threat. It may, therefore, include *in extremis* the use of lethal force to make that defence.

Our prayer must also be for the aggressors, especially the low-ranking soldiers and officials bullied and coerced into actions they know to be wrong. But our prayers must go right to the top of this 'tower of Babel' and include Vladimir Putin himself. Do not be put off by wondering what to pray – this is one for God to sort out – just pray for God to step in in the way only He can know.

Last Sunday's gospel did NOT instruct us not to judge. This might be a surprise. Surely, He said 'Do not judge'. Correct – he did, but that's not the whole sentence. The whole line is 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourself.' Or in other words, you may judge, provided you are happy to be judged in the same way yourself. And this is the springboard for today's gospel which doesn't say that I shouldn't see the splinter in my brother's eye, neither does it say that I should not make an attempt to remove it. Rather I must be willing to submit to the same examination myself.

Indeed, today's gospel invites us to make a judgement call: 'every tree can be told by its own fruit – a bad man draws what is bad from the store of badness in his heart.' The bad, poisonous fruit now spilling out across Ukraine is diagnostic that there is bad, rotten heart, both individual and collective, driving it forward. Being a Christian does not mean being a naïve doormat.

Our prayer must still be that, however unlikely it may seem, this bad rotten heart may ultimately be healed and saved. At the heart of our Christian Catholic morality is the understanding that God the Father wills that all people might be saved. To this end, old age and death is ultimately kind. Megalomania ultimately becomes a self-made earthly prison from which there is no escape. Only the infirmity of old age and ultimately death can dismantle it. But our prayer even then is for the final attempt of Grace to turn it around in that healing after death that we call Purgatory. We may not pray that anyone should be damned forever. That is left up to God alone.

Applying these same judgements to ourselves, as we must, we ask ourselves: 'Am I, too, at risk of sliding into a way of being that is increasingly detached from reality?' This question is then the springboard for our move into Lent this week. Our annual Lenten observance is our reality check, forty days in which to stop and examine our lives: where have they been, where are they going. Are they becoming more real, more grounded, more truthful; or am I indulging in half-truths and comforting fantasies? I may not judge Vladimir Putin, unless I am willing to make this same examination of myself.