

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday (C)

27<sup>th</sup> February 2022

‘Preserve the world from the madness of war’

Eccl.us 27: *the test of a man is in his conversation.*

Ps 91: *...to proclaim Your love in the morning*

1Cor 15: *death is swallowed up in victory.*

Lk 6: 39–45: *take the plank out of your own eye first.*

Perhaps, in the light of this week’s tragic events in the Ukraine, we might not feel very well disposed towards the idea of ‘taking the plank out of our own eye, so as to take the splinter out of our brother’s’! We might feel well within our rights, I suppose, to be observant of — and critical of, even *disgusted* by — the plank in President Putin’s eye, before we considered the speck in our own. Understandably, in our own judgments, and in line with most international comment, we are probably outraged by the assault upon the country of the Ukraine, and would wish to speak out in judgment and condemnation. Whilst few of us, I imagine, have enough political and historical knowledge to bring an all-reaching insight to bear on the complexities of the Russia–Ukraine relationship, yet this all-out assault, this armed invasion on a sovereign state, can be nothing other than a gross offence against peace, and European stability. The Holy Father, Pope Francis,

took the unprecedented step, on Friday — in a break with protocol — instead of summoning the Russian ambassador to the Vatican, of getting in his car and going straight round to the Russian embassy himself, to make his indignation felt. The Pope stated last week:

“My heart aches greatly at the worsening situation in Ukraine. Despite the diplomatic efforts of the last few weeks, increasingly alarming scenarios are opening up. Like me, many people all over the world are feeling anguish and concern. Once again the peace of all is threatened by partisan interests. I would like to appeal to those with political responsibility to examine their consciences seriously before God, who is the God of peace and not of war; who is the Father of all, not just of some, who wants us to be brothers and not enemies. I pray that all the parties involved refrain from any action that would cause even more suffering to the people, destabilising coexistence between nations and bringing international law into disrepute.

And now I would like to appeal to everyone, believers and non-believers alike. Jesus taught us that the diabolical senselessness of violence is answered with God's weapons, with prayer and fasting. I invite everyone to make 2<sup>nd</sup> March, Ash Wednesday, a Day of Fasting for Peace. I encourage believers in a special way to dedicate themselves intensely to prayer and fasting on that day. May the Queen of Peace preserve the world from the

madness of war.”

Cardinal Parolin, the Vatican’s Secretary of State added a commentary to Pope Francis’s words, when he said:

“There is still time for goodwill; there is still room for negotiation. There is still room for the exercise of a wisdom that prevents the prevalence of partisan interests, protects the legitimate aspirations of each and spares the world from madness and saves the world from the folly and horrors of war. We believers do not lose hope for a glimmer of conscience from those who hold the destinies of the world in their hands.”

Even in the face of such aggression and atrocities, then, we must always respond in a way that is Christian and not merely indignant in a secular way. This means, as Cardinal Parolin said — and as the Pope has urged us for Ash Wednesday coming — an attitude of *hope*, and therefore of *prayer and fasting*, that hostilities may cease; negotiations may commence with any one of the many international offers of mediation; and that those defending their country may have protection and a spiritual outlook of their own mission, rather than merely a nationalistic or patriotic motivation. And it also means, yes, constantly measuring

one’s criticism of others against the need to be self reflective on one’s own failings, flaws and sins. Even when we are weighing up our own personal sins as against the huge evils of initiating the devastating consequences of war, yet we must look to our hearts, and the peace, or lack of peace, therein. This, surely, is the perpetual message of the Gospel of Jesus: that our priority is that we must convert our own hearts first — i.e. invite the Holy Spirit to convert *us* to *Him* — because conversion of the world to goodness is only possible as person by person, soul by soul, becomes converted to utter commitment to goodness and to God.

So: what better than to look to Lent, whose start we shall celebrate this Wednesday with the solemn sign of ashes on our heads? I always think that it is worth seriously thinking about Lent on this Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday, as opposed to waiting until Lent has already begun. Ash Wednesday is a day that has a special status in our Catholic mentality — a day that we feel urged to mark as a sign of our desiring a good, holy, and fruitful

Lenten season. I think that that's a good attitude to take: to keep Ash Wednesday in its *fullness* as a solemn and devout start to one of the most important seasons of the year. And by doing so, we can also fulfil that expectation of Pope Francis that we will be uniting ourselves this Wednesday in prayer with the war-torn people of the Ukraine. So, what might "keeping Ash Wednesday in its fullness" mean?

- i. First, **prayer** — make it a day of special prayer; be acutely conscious of its being Ash Wednesday, and mark it by setting aside more prayer time than you usually do. Maybe you can also thereby set a new pattern of prayer for the whole of Lent;
- ii. Second, **fasting** — which also should be a major part of our Lenten discipline (the classic "giving something up for Lent") but which on Ash Wednesday takes on a particular character: a deliberate choice to eat less, perhaps to abstain entirely from one meal in the day if possible;
- iii. Third, **abstinence** from meat — we do this on the first and last days of Lent, Ash Wed and Good Fri, to signify particular penance; don't absentmindedly forget or ignore this — it's a way of expressing with our bodily actions a simplicity that should characterize Lent for us;
- iv. Fourth, the **Mass** of Ash Wednesday — please make

every effort to be at Mass that day, and to receive the blessed ashes as a mark of the penance that this season demands. Even more than any other year, owing to its being asked of us by Pope Francis, please note the times and plan your day around getting to Mass. We have 3 Masses here at Newman House: 12.30pm, 5.30pm, and 9pm, and a whole set of college Masses too, on campus, at Brunel, Imperial, Kings and LSE (times in newsletter). I am sure that many, if not most, of these Masses will be offered by the celebrants for peace in the Ukraine. Imagine what a *tidal wave* of prayer for peace will be offered up from the face of the earth through the Masses worldwide on Ash Wednesday, thanks to the Pope's appeal. Please hear that appeal from Pope Francis and be united with this global prayer at Mass this Wednesday, making the spiritual offering of your hearts for the beginning of Lent for this very very important intention of peace and the cessation of war.

Maybe we could do with hearing again those words of St Paul from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: *Never give in, then, my dear brothers; never admit defeat; keep on working at the Lord's work always, knowing that, in the Lord, you cannot be labouring in vain.* May the labours of your Lent 2022 be truly fruitful for you and for the world; we do not labour in vain; we labour *together*, that God's kingdom come.