

TFTD L27: Tuesday of Holy Week

Pilgrims join the crowds in the narrow streets of the Old City of Jerusalem



Today's Holy Week reflection comes from Rev Jon Hale, Rector of Alderley and Birtles

In my previous parish of Crawley Down, in Sussex, there was a grand country house called Rowfant House.

In 1946 Rowfant House was leased by its owner to the Latvian Lutheran Church, and in 1962 that church purchased Rowfant House and its grounds. In 2001 when I was Vicar of All Saints', Crawley Down – a few miles from Gatwick Airport, Rowfant House was a 'little Latvia' in Sussex.

After I had been in post as Vicar of Crawley Down for a while, in 2001 I was introduced to the new Latvian Lutheran Church minister at Rowfant – a young woman newly arrived from Riga. This young lady was, I guess, 25 years old in 2001: her parish covered all of England south of Birmingham, plus the whole of Ireland. My new colleague spoke Latvian, Russian, Swedish, German and English, and she gave me a history lesson. In 1918, Latvia gained its independence from Russia in the chaos of the revolution and the civil war. In 1940 Latvia was overrun by the Soviet Union, and then in 1941 Nazi Germany pushed out the Soviets.

In 1944 the Soviets came back, and they stayed until the Baltic States gained independence in 1991. The mass deportation of 25th March 1949 is the defining experience of life under Russian rule in Latvia. To quote Wikipedia: On 25 March 1949, 43,000 rural residents were deported to Siberia in a sweeping operation in all three [Baltic states](#).

It just so happened that also in the parish of Crawley Down there was – and remains - an Anglican monastery – the only house of the Community of the Servants of the Will of God – the CSWG. The CSWG’s founding spirituality is the Orthodox Church of Russia.

Crawley Down monastery is a ‘little Russia’ within Sussex. When Crawley Down Monastery prays for reconciliation between the churches and for church unity, it is praying that the churches of the West and the Orthodox Churches of the East will become one.

I would convene meetings of the ministers of all the churches of the parish at the monastery – Roman Catholic, Baptist, Church of England, the CSWG, and the Latvian Lutheran Church.

Privately, my Latvian colleague would tell me what she thought of the Anglican monks and their Russian-inspired liturgy. She would say, dismissively, ‘They are just playing at it’. And when I asked her about Russia, she said: ‘you get used to it’.

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Before I first travelled in Ukraine with my old mate from school – John Gray – in 2010, John had pestered me for a long time to let him show me Hungary, Slovakia and Ukraine.

He said that in the twenty years he had been travelling there, Hungary, Slovakia and Ukraine had become more and more Western, and that I should see these countries before they became completely Westernised.

And, indeed, in 2010 I found in west Ukraine cash dispensers on the street corner in every small town, with three languages to choose from: Ukrainian, German and English.

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That, I think, 12 years later, is one of the fears that have led Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to launch a ‘Special Military Operation in Ukraine’: it’s become all too Westernised.

Ukraine and Russia – and Belarus – have a dysfunctional family relationship. Ukraine is coveted by Moscow because it is in Ukraine that Christianity first took root in what became the Russian lands. At various times, large parts of Ukraine have been known in Russia as ‘New Russia’ or as ‘Little Russia’.

Ukraine now is a 21st Century horror, and I think we are all going to have to learn to live with Ukraine’s crazy neighbour – our crazy neighbour.

Worship at the Latvian Lutheran Church at Rowfant seemed to me – in translation - primarily prayer of intercession for the safety and peace of Latvia and its people, only some 10 years after the Russians had left, and independence from Russia had been regained.

An expatriate community - newly freed from tyranny, worshipped to reinforce its national identity, to pray that the nation's freedom and independence may remain – and in their trauma after the long years of oppression.

Some say that the Baltic States are next on Mr Putin's shopping list.

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When I made my second visit to Ukraine with John Gray in 2011 we travelled in the extreme southwest of Ukraine – Zakarpattia.

This is 'little Hungary' within Ukraine. Until the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, Zakarpattia had been part of Hungary for centuries. But in 1920 after the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Zakarpattia became the extreme eastern end of Czechoslovakia. And then in 1945 Zakarpattia passed to the USSR as part of Ukraine.

In 2011 we were travelling in a train that had been chartered by Hungarians. It was a through train from Budapest to Zakarpattia, and I was in a carriage that had been block-booked by Hungarian and British railway enthusiasts. We saw at first hand the nationalistic fervour of some of our Hungarian fellow passengers as they celebrated being in old Hungary. There were plenty of pre-1920 Hungarian national flags being waved. In Ukrainian Zakarpattia the clocks run an hour behind west Ukraine time: in Ukrainian Zakarpattia, the clocks run to Budapest time

This year, Orthodox Easter Day is a week after our Western Easter. Holy Communion is the sacrament of unity, and Holy Communion celebrates Easter. Sadly, the churches of East and West are not in unity, even in our celebration of Easter.

Even as we celebrate the origin of the sacrament of unity we are disunited; we are out of step; we are one behind the other; we are a broken witness to the God who heals and unites.

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To close, and for a lesson in brokenness, I will read to you now from the news posting of the Revd Canon Malcolm Rogers, Chaplain of St Andrew's Anglican Church in Moscow, dated 11th March this year.

St Andrew's Anglican Church in Moscow is situated only 10 minutes' walk from the Kremlin, the physical and geographical centre of power. We are in the centre of power and yet we are powerless. Today, as many of our dear friends have left Russia, and as we nervously wonder whether or when we should leave, we are even more conscious of our powerlessness.

Conflict was predicted and we were helpless, unable to do anything to prevent it. Now that 'special military operations', as they are called here, have begun, there is nothing that we can do to stop them.

But it is precisely our powerlessness which means that there are things that we can do. We are Gospel people, who serve a crucified but risen Lord. We are the 'nobodies' of 1 Corinthians 1, and it is our very powerlessness and insignificance and foolishness that can also be our strength, if it is handed to God.

First of all we are simply here. We are a community of very messed up people, but as we gather together to hear the Word of God and to receive bread and wine, a community of Russians and foreigners gathered together, centred on and receiving from Jesus Christ, our simple presence can be a witness of what the world can be like, of the future kingdom.

Secondly, in our powerlessness, we can worship and pray. We pray for peace. That is far more than just praying for the absence of war. We praise God for the coming Kingdom, for the hope he has given us. It is our very powerlessness which opens to us our dependence on God and on him doing wonderful works.

Thirdly, we can still speak truth. There are some things that we cannot say in Moscow, but we can still preach Jesus Christ crucified and risen and reigning. We can call people to repentance and offer people hope. In my 30 plus years of ministry, I have never known a time and a place when people are more hungering for God.

And fourthly we can love and serve our neighbour. We read the news and feel powerless. Most of us are in no position to solve world problems or to bring peace. The job advert for this post in Moscow said that the person appointed could make a difference for world peace. On those grounds I have been a spectacular failure!

But we can make a difference where we are, and love the actual physical neighbours who God has given us. For some, the neighbours are Ukrainian refugees.

In our hubris we think that we are somebodies who can save the world - and we end up paralysed. But it is when we realise our powerlessness, that in the worlds eyes we are 'nobodies', that we can begin to see the neighbour who God has given us and learn to serve them.