



GRAY'S
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Lent - March 6th 2022

“The Empire of the Son”

Joel 2 : 1-2, 12-17 & Gospel of Matthew 4: 1-11

An ambitious leader invades a neighbouring country which his predecessors once ruled and which he believes still belongs to him. His motives are deeply patriotic, but it's also about his own vanity and the need to leave his mark on history. His supporters idolise him, but others believe he is unstable and will bring about his own demise.

This is Shakespeare's Henry Vth, which had its public opening at the Donmar Warehouse this last week. Kit Harington, who made his name with 'Game of Thrones', may not be a great Shakespearian actor, but he does convey the complex character of the King: ruthless in putting down opponents at home, ready to use whatever violence is necessary to bring off his invasion of France. He has imperial ambitions, to make England one of the strongest military powers in Europe.

Today, as Putin pursues his bloody path across the Ukraine, as the horrors of the Russian invasion fill the headlines, and also our own thoughts and prayers, we read as we always do on this first Sunday in Lent, about the temptations of Jesus.

And the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'

Power is always tempting. It can all be yours, says the devil, if you will worship me. I don't under-estimate or seek to excuse what is happening today, but Henry Vth might remind us not to get totally self-righteous about it. We didn't hold on to Normandy very long, but we did spend the next four hundred years in various forms of imperial activity, all around the world, and never quite sure whether we were acting in their best interests or our own.

More recently we've had no qualms about selling armaments to nations which have used them to invade other people's territory. And only now are we facing up to the City of London's complicity in financial irregularity and money-laundering, not just from Eastern Europe but from corrupt elites throughout the Developing World, out of which, let's be honest, the Employed Bar has done very well. We have preferred weak regulation, poor supervision and 'turning a blind eye'. We have avoided the Nuremberg question : it may be legal, but is it right ? We foolishly thought that empires were no longer created by military might but were simply the economic structures and financial systems which we can exploit to our own advantage and not ask too many questions. But now military power is threatening even that.

Why do people want to build their own empires ? The other two temptations may help answer that.

The devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

People like a quick fix, easy answers, comfortable solutions. The devil clearly believes that you can con most of the people most of the time. Give them what they want, don't encourage them to stand back and ask 'is this true ?', 'is this right ?'. The devil says to Jesus, forget all that stuff about 'taking up your Cross', just go with the flow, give 'em what they want, and what they want will keep you safe as well.

Putin's appeal to the Russian people is pretty much the same. As in Henry Vth they are to be 'a happy few', a 'band of brothers', defending their sceptred isle. He justifies his actions on the grounds of nationalism, correcting historical wrongs, and, I am ashamed to say, religion. And here, again, we must come clean, for the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church are amongst Putin's supporters and apologists.

The reason is not difficult to see. Some time ago, during the Soviet period, I was partly responsible for relationships between the churches here in Britain and Ireland and the churches in Russia. At the time most of their buildings had been closed, and only those bishops and monks who supported the Communist regime were allowed to operate publicly. My counterpart, an

Archimandrite who I stayed with in Zagorsk, just north of Moscow, was, I believe a committed Christian, but he was almost certainly also KGB.

Since then the Iron Curtain has come down, the Church has been restored to its old position and recovered its old power. It has happily gone along with Putin's appeal to nationalistic pride, but in so doing it has given way to this temptation to use religion to mask rather than promote the truth. At the same time, a few Russian Orthodox have come out this week to criticise Putin, and the Independent Orthodox Church of the Ukraine, which broke away a few years ago, has continued to speak out.

So we come, inevitably, to the third Temptation

The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone"'

During his ministry Jesus showed that bread was important, that meeting other people's physical needs is not some optional activity. He had compassion on the hungry crowd and fed them. But we do not live by bread alone. And so this temptation goes to the heart of it all: what does matter more than anything else? What is at the centre of your life?

Lent is always a time for self-examination. We will do that at a more personal level when we meet again here on Palm Sunday, and before that with Richard Harries at our annual Words and Music evening. But today, as our hearts go out to the people of the Ukraine, that question has a greater significance. What does matter more than anything else? The answer is not aggressive nationalism, or any other pursuit of power, whether at Agincourt or in Moscow. Rather, it is about freedom, the right of people to live in peace, economic justice as well as the rule of law, relationships between nations based on respect and equal rights.

The story of the Temptations of Jesus, and his rejection of them, stands in judgement on our world:

in judgement on Vladimir Putin, and his totally unjustified war ;

in judgement on all those who seek power over others ;

in judgement on those who use religion to justify it ;

in judgement on those who deny to others what we all need to live and thrive.

Kyrie eleison : Lord, have mercy on the Ukraine

Christe eleison : Christ, have mercy on us all

Miserere mei, Deus: Lord, have mercy on me Amen. *

*The service included a version of the Kyries, to a Ukrainian Orthodox chant, and, for the beginning of Lent, Allegri's setting of Psalm 51, « Miserere mei, Deus.