

## Ukraine

### 1.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, in the prophecy of Ezekiel, we read that the prophet is taken by God to sit among the Jewish exiles in Babylonia. He feels great turmoil in his spirit; and when he comes to where the exiles are, he says, 'I sat there overwhelmed among them for seven days.'

We who have come to sit with you today are not prophets but only fellow-humans and fellow-believers. We are here because the terrible events of the last weeks have created turmoil in our own spirits, grief and anger at what you have suffered. Thousands continue to die. Millions have been made exiles in their own country as well as abroad.

Like Ezekiel, we do not want to come with easy words, with cheap comfort or hope. We want to hear what you want to say; we want to be able to help your voice be heard around the world; we want to learn how you live with the terror and apparent hopelessness of the situation around you. Because the hope and loving solidarity you give each other is a gift to all of us too.

So our hope is simply to stand alongside you, to let you know you are not forgotten, and to hear from you and receive life and hope from you. Our Christian Scriptures say that 'if one part of the Body suffers, all suffer.' What makes you suffer, what threatens your life, threatens the lives of all the human family. And if this is true, the least we can do is to be here to sit with you, even if only for this short time, even if we are overwhelmed, like Ezekiel, with the tragedy.

For us, it is a way of saying to the various countries and contexts we come from, 'It is our life and hope too that is at stake in the agony that this country is enduring.' No cheap comfort. But we are here because we recognise that we cannot be free, we cannot even be human, if you are not free and if you are treated as less than human.

We may be able to find strength in recognising afresh what freedom and humanity might look like; and we feel the bitterness of knowing that those who abuse the freedom and humanity of others are in fact destroying their own humanity, wounding the image of God in themselves as well as in their victims. The oppressor, the aggressor, destroys others – but in doing so destroys his own integrity and faith and future. Our fellowship here today may not change the circumstances of this dreadful conflict, or touch the hearts of the aggressors, but we can still speak of the human dignity we share and commit ourselves to the long struggle to see that this human dignity is affirmed and defended throughout our world.

### 2.

We are a group of friends from diverse religious families, hoping that we may extend that friendship, and be welcomed into your friendship. We believe that only in direct human contact and conversation is real, positive coexistence possible between people with differences and disagreements. As representatives of different faiths, we know that we must see each other's faces and hear each other's voices if we are ever to advance beyond suspicion and stereotypes.

To understand and respond to any tragedy, any conflict, we need to see its human face. It has been rightly said about the Holocaust that it is not the death of six million people but the death

of 'six million times one' – each death is uniquely itself, uniquely terrible. At a distance, we see statistics, blurred pictures, general reports. Whether here in Ukraine or in Ethiopia or Afghanistan, it is essential to remember that the only way a tragedy is truly and fully experienced is by one person at a time, the person whose life has been broken up and wounded – the individual mother or child terrified by falling missiles, the individual soldier in the field, the individual exhausted medical worker in the hospital, the individual packing up the contents of a home.

Forget these individual faces, and it becomes easier to justify all manner of things – invasion, enslavement, indiscriminate bombing. What we see today is yet another instance of a great power that has forgotten this and is enslaved by the generalisations and fictions and propaganda that serve collective self-interest and collective paranoia. We hope that in our time with you we shall learn things we can convey to our own communities so as to bring alive for them the urgency of your situation - things we have learned through what we have seen in individual lives, faces, stories.

Friendship implies equality – not someone simply 'doing good' to another, but a real mutual enrichment and respect. Jesus Christ says to his followers, 'I do not call you slaves but friends', because he shares with them the longings of his own heart, and invites their love and solidarity with him in his sufferings. We are praying for a future for this country in which there is deep respect for difference and a real sharing of hopes, fears and needs; a climate of trust, where solidarity is asked and given, recognising – as a great poet of my own nation, Wales, once said – 'the one root underneath all the branches'.

This recognition is what builds trust; trust builds friendship. We learn more of how the other person, the other community, shares our human fragility and our human hopes. We no longer take refuge behind the walls of some myth of racial or social or religious superiority, but know that we stand on the same earth together and that our well-being is in one another's hands. If you are defending your nation against the Russian aggressor, it is also because you are defending the humanity *they* are destroying in themselves; you are defending something that they too will one day need.

3.

It may sound a strange thing to say, but one of the things we must learn to hope for is that we may all come to understand just how much we need one another. Violence so often grows out of people denying that they need others. Yet in times of terrible crisis and trauma, we gladly recognise that we cannot find in our own individual resources what we need to be ourselves, to be human. Others are needed to bring us to life – not just in terms of practical support and help but in terms of knowing that we belong and that we are welcomed and valued.

Part of the history of this city is the story of how so many Jews were saved from transportation and death by the efforts of those who were leaders here in the early 1940's: it is as though at least some recognised at last that if this city, this nation, indeed this continent, rejected and killed its Jewish citizens – as had happened so often in this and so many other countries over the centuries - it could never be truly itself. A strong nation, a strong community, knows how to respect and learn from its minorities, because it is not afraid to share freedom with all It knows

the truths it values and lives by. It does not have to kill or humiliate others to be sure of itself. 'The truth will set you free', says Jesus.

Every religious tradition acknowledges that we depend on a reality quite beyond our control or understanding, a holy presence in whose light we see that we are all reflections of an infinite life of love and understanding, so that we know we have a place in the universe and a dignity that cannot be taken away. To know this is to be free – free from the desperate urge to hurt and diminish others so as to make ourselves feel safe and superior, the urge towards evil and oppression that arises from some deep fear that we are not loved and valued. How often in Jewish and Christian Scripture do we hear from God the words, 'Do not be afraid'?

Faith is above all the trustful knowledge that our lives are precious. War is a terrible assault on this knowledge because it is a process in which lives are sacrificed in cruel, arbitrary ways, especially in the indiscriminate terror of modern methods of war – as we have seen in these last weeks. The faith and hope we want to witness to along with you is a trust that the strong and fearless commitment to freedom and dignity which the people of Ukraine have shown will be a sign of hope worldwide – even, one day, to those who have been enemies and aggressors, when they begin to wake up to the terrible nature of what they have done.

We pray that your resistance to terror and threat will remain strong. We need your courage and your faith in a just, peaceful future. We pray today and shall go on praying that God will bring peace and healing when conflict is past; and while it continues, that God will bring courage, fairness, generosity and welcome for each other and for all those who have suffered most deeply. May God bless you all in this city and this nation.

Bishop Rowan Williams.