

Pray for Peace: Luke 13.31-35 & Genesis 15: 1-7
Sermon for Sunday 13 March 2022 (Rev Phil Wootton)



Jesus wept over Jerusalem. There is a church that marks the spot where those tears are remembered. It's called, Dominus Flevit – 'The Lord Wept'. The architect designed it in the shape of a tear drop. Situated on the side of the Mount of Olives, it gives a view over the cityscape of Jerusalem, spread out in front of you across the



valley. The window gives an impression of looking through a crown of thorns. Jerusalem, whose very name means 'city of peace,' has known so little peace over the centuries. Jerusalem represents the world – made for glorious harmony, wrecked by human conflict and greed. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Pray for the peace of the world.

In today's Gospel passage Jesus speaks of his deep love for Jerusalem and its people: 'How often I have longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not have it.' He expresses God's longing to help and protect, God's mothering nature if you like. But it will not be forced, and cannot be achieved by a divine click of the fingers. It involves the long and painful process of persuading people who'd rather go their own way. It involves the route of sacrificial love, on which Jesus is embarking. It's a daunting prospect, helping people who don't want to be helped, yet this is why Jesus has come.

Today's passage is full of foreboding. The powers of darkness are starting to line up against him: 'Herod,' warn some Pharisees, 'wants to kill you.' Notice that the Pharisees are not always the enemy: there were many shades of Pharisee. But there's no doubt where Herod stands. A puppet king installed by the Romans, installing his own henchmen in the Temple, he has no space of the outbreak of goodness, compassion and justice that accompanies Jesus. But, 'today and tomorrow' Jesus has God's work to do. Though the powers-that-be seem to control everything, nothing will ultimately stand in the way of God's purposes. 'Today and tomorrow' the Gospel will be preached. 'Today and tomorrow' people will hear the Good News, be healed of their diseases and be exorcised of their demons. Then in God's time – 'the third day' – when each has had time to make up their own minds – the denouement will come in Jerusalem.

Today – our today – it feels like the world is having a good kicking. I don't need to repeat the litany of disasters and sheer awfulness that fill our newspapers. Such news is in our faces all day long. We feel powerless to do anything about it. All we can pray. All we must do is pray. For many of us, it is enough that we're told to pray. For many, it is enough that we join with Jesus in his prayers and tears for the world. But others ask, we all prayed against this Russian invasion, so why did it still happen? We pray for ceasefires, for humanitarian corridors, for withdrawal of troops, but nothing seems to happen. So the question is raised, what use is prayer? There are several answers:

First, prayer is an act of solidarity with those who suffer. At the moment the colours of yellow and blue are flashed everywhere in solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Our prayers act the same way, standing with others to say they are not alone. It can be powerful, especially if they know we are praying.

Second, prayer changes the one who prays. Prayer enables us to articulate our concerns, to express our feelings for those who suffer, to explore different perspectives, to make our commitments to act, and to be open to change our hearts and minds. It's in prayer we ask what God may be saying to us. Through prayer, we can find peace of mind, and strength of purpose.

But can prayers make an 'objective' difference? There's no simple answer. We don't know the effects of our prayers. It always takes an act of faith. Many will cite occasions they have seen prayer work, but world events are complex, and open to different interpretations. There is no proof. If, as the Bible implies, there are hidden spiritual forces behind the powers of this world, and those forces may be malign, then it truly matters that believers give full voice to their prayers – pray, and pray, and pray, and never give up. It's a spiritual battle into which we have been enlisted, and that means we're much nearer the front line than we imagine. Whether we understand it like that or not, the outcome isn't simply in the big news stories. How do we know our prayers have not had an influence, perhaps helped someone find new courage, or perhaps held a soldier's finger back from the trigger of his rifle? We pray in faith. In the Psalms, very often prayer is like a wrestling match, the Psalmist demanding of God why his enemies surround him, why God's power to save seems to have gone away. And so often, the problem is not solved, but the one who wrestles in prayer comes away seeing things in a whole different way.

That was the case for Abram in our Old Testament reading. It was many years since Abram had first heard God's call, and had followed as faithfully as he could. He had set up his family in a foreign land, and prayed to God for the future. God comes to him again with great promises, and finally Abram snaps: 'God, you promise me a rich reward, but it's meaningless because you have not given me the one thing I need and long for – a son and heir. I'm an old man and it's too late for me.' God shows Abram another perspective. Look at the night sky, he says. See if you can count the stars. That's how many descendants you will have. Don't think of one child: think of descendants as numerous as the stars you cannot count. 'Abram believed on the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness.' Faith brings a new worldview, the possibility of a new future.

Jesus shed tears over Jerusalem. Tragically, people didn't turn to him, and his tears and prayers did not stop war from happening. But, ultimately, they did lead to a new future. That continues to be our hope as we engage in the seemingly hopeless task of praying for peace in our world today.