

The invasion of Ukraine



In the Old Testament story in Exodus, we have Moses coming down from Mount Sinai and he holds in his hands two tablets of stone on which are inscribed the Ten Commandments. We are told in the narrative that what has been written down is what Almighty God himself has spoken to Moses. Everything from 'You shall have no other Gods before me to Thou shalt not commit murder' is inscribed by the finger of God himself on the tablets of stone. In other words, this moral code is carved in stone, it is to be permanent, and it is sacrosanct – it is of God. The moral code is given by God to his people because first and foremost it is good for them. It sets out the basis on which the Israelite people can learn to live peaceably together. The importance of a code of law on which all can agree becomes the cornerstone for the twelve tribes of Israel being able to come together as a united people, working together in the name of God and enabling each and everyone to flourish.

This principle of a code of law is a means by which people live and work together for the common good and it is fair to say that it has not always been easy or straightforward, but it has been vital not least in the post-Second World War era, and since the establishment of the United Nations Organisation in 1945, in helping to preserve world peace. I am not suggesting here that the United Nations Organisation has always been successful in maintaining world

peace but rather that the principle of a code of law has come to be valued and accepted as normative in civilising human relationships. The journey across the centuries for this principle has been hard-won. Since 1945 we can say that an international code of law has come into existence by which all states are measured in their response to each other, and it is to international law that different governments should refer when wanting to resolve their differences. This is a sacred biblical principle. The rule of law is one given by God himself to help humanity in its quest to live peaceably together and as a tool with which to reach, admittedly sometimes difficult, judgements and decisions.

When one state ignores the rule of law, as we have seen this week with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, then that state can only be described as participating in uncivilised behaviour which is both damaging to the victim and damaging to the perpetrator. The capacity for a bully in the playground to share in meaningful relationships with others becomes diminished. As a result of Vladimir Putin and the Russian government's action in invading Ukraine, the Russian people themselves are now less able to share fully in the life of the human family. And it is their loss. And it is our loss too. Ultimately, this aggressive behaviour diminishes the Russian people themselves and in consequence, means that as a people they are less than God wants them to be. No one plays with a bully. Bullies cannot be trusted and are damaging to others. In the primary school playground, teachers take the appropriate action to isolate them until such time as they are able to recognise that their behaviour needs to be reformed and this need for reformation is one which they have to recognise for themselves before they are allowed to return to the playground as an equal.

The consequences of breaching international law by Russia for the Ukrainian people is horrifying to watch and none of us can be less than empathic and generous in our response in wanting to help those who are directly caught up in the fighting. The cost of the sanctions that have been imposed will probably affect our own standards of living. We must not complain. Any difficulty we must endure as an economic cost of isolating Russia must be borne cheerfully. It is the least we can do to support our Ukrainian brothers and sisters.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has rightly labelled Russian bullying behaviour as 'a terrible evil' and he is right to do so. This war can never be declared by Russia as a godly act. It is a breach of all that God desires for his people, not least the Russian people themselves and it grieves his heart in the same way that it grieves our own.

Our ongoing prayer must be that Vladimir Putin and the Russian Government recognise the error of their behaviour, that the place of international law is restored, that peace will once more prevail in the sovereign state of Ukraine and that the Russian people will once more be able to become full members of the human family. This must be our prayer and our hope in the days and weeks that follow.

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