

Are we heading for World War III?

Amongst the many crises currently gripping the world a good number are linked directly or indirectly to the unprovoked disastrous invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin.

It is important to attribute the onslaught on Ukraine to one man as, despite the existence of ultra-nationalists of a fascist disposition in Russia, broadly speaking the invasion does not seem to have universal enthusiastic support on the part of the people. Moreover, in a country starved of non-state impartial media many seem simply to have accepted (but little more) the official line.

Of course, it is difficult to ascertain exactly what is going on and the famous dictum of Churchill in 1939 that Russian is “a riddle, wrapped inside a mystery, inside an enigma” still stands. Clearly, the war is not going the way in which Putin anticipated. Perhaps he is a victim of his own propaganda appearing to imagine, buoyed no doubt by the ‘successful’ annexation of Crimea, that flag waving, cheering Ukrainians would have welcomed Russian troops in a latter day *anschluss* returning to the fold as what Russian history describes as ‘Little Russia’.

In any case, the world is in a much more dangerous place since the start of the conflict, thousands have died unnecessarily, numerous war crimes have been committed and millions of Ukrainians live in daily terror of arbitrary bombing and missile attack. At the same time the emerging world energy crisis as the Russians cut off supplies of gas and oil will affect many millions more, threaten to destabilise economies, agriculture and industry and impoverish many. The resultant dash for energy self-sufficiency, especially renewable energy sources, would normally be considered a virtue but now it is an act of desperation.

Writers at times such as these often find themselves drawn to apocalyptic scriptural references and the Book of Revelation is a primary source. Conquest, war, famine and death are present day realities. The Gospel of Matthew’s “wars and rumours of wars, nations rising against nations, earthquakes” and so on, are quoted as Jesus’ warning of the “beginning of the birth pangs”.¹ Yet Christians should dare to hope and work for a better world even as the old seems to be passing.

In this context the Church has been too silent, not least the highly influential Russian Orthodox Church under its Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus whose latest statement about Russian soldiers says that dying in Ukraine “washes away all sins”². This is of course precisely in the same spirit as Papal pronouncements during the Crusades.

There are other more enlightened examples of leadership during war such as that of Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson during the First World War, who

¹ Matthew 24 vv 6-13

² <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-patriarch-kirill-dying-ukraine-sins/32052380.html>

managed to walk between encouraging the nation and criticising the cruelties of war and sometimes government policy.

However, this is not an historical paper but rather a reflection on the enormity of the current situation where we might be sleepwalking into World War Three. It was Albert Einstein who, when asked whether humans might fight a nuclear war, replied that it was possible, but the next war after that would be fought with sticks and stones. More alarmingly, Nikita Krushchev the Soviet Leader (1953-64) who could often come out with *bon mots* said on superpower relations “If you start throwing hedgehogs under me, I shall throw a couple of porcupines under you!”³

Perhaps church leaders everywhere should get back on their knees quickly and pray for peace, before it's too late.

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Feast of St Michael and all Angels 2022

³ Reported in The New York Times 1963