**UKRAINE**

This has been a momentous week. We’re seen something happening that we never thought would happen again – a European country being invaded. It’s changed our perception of peace and redrawn our understanding of post-war Europe and how we do politics. And its sent a chill through our hearts. One mistake, one overspill into NATO territory and the balloon really does go up, and who knows where that would end.

We’ve all been following this with the utmost concern this week, and its going to dominate our news agenda, our political agenda, maybe our personal agenda for the foreseeable future. Inwardly we groan. How could it have come to this?

But we’re also people of faith. What does our faith offer to us and to others in a time like this?

It’s interesting that our gospel reading today is about the Transfiguration, when Jesus was shown, just for a moment, in his glory. The veil was held back and Peter, James and John glimpsed the true nature of this Jesus – a man, yes, but a man who disclosed something of the glory of God, indeed as much of the glory of God as a human being could contain without blowing a fuse.

In other words, the down-to-earth life of Jesus that they’d been sharing, the teaching and healing, the conversations on the road, the jokes, the arguments, the washing of dishes and the treatment of blisters, the ordinary life of Jesus was put into an infinitely bigger perspective. There was a bigger reality, a deeper truth, into which their experiences with Jesus needed to be placed. There was so much more in him. There was the reality and the glory of God.

So somehow we as people of faith will be wanting to fit our present fears into the bigger reality, the deeper truth of God. And that helps us to handle, to mitigate our fears.

When facing fear I think there are **three things we can do**. The first is to check that the fear we feel is actually well founded on the facts. There are two occasions in my life when I’ve been persuaded that walking on coals burning at 1000 degrees F was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It seemed absurd when I thought about it, and the fact that there was an ambulance on hand on each occasion didn’t help my anxiety much either. But two hours of training in which some of the physics of walking on burning coals was spelt out did in fact relativise the fear. Together with the knowledge that thousands of other people must have done this before me and they hadn’t all ended the evening in hospital.

So checking the facts can help. It doesn’t mean fear is wrong because fear is fear for the person experiencing it, but it might at least relativise the fear by calling it out and naming it. And listening to the experts. In this case those who remind us that Putin would be crazy to risk extending his reach to NATO countries like the Baltic States because NATO’s military strength outweighs Russia’s by ten to one. So check the facts.

**The second thing** to do in facing our fears, is to accept that some fear is entirely justified, it can’t be relativised very much, because it’s a real and present danger. In 1984 when the global situation politically and militarily was very fragile and there was much talk of the danger of nuclear war I remember being truly afraid as a young man with a precious wife and two small daughters, wondering what we would do in the face of a nuclear winter. It wasn’t unreasonable to be afraid. I didn’t have to be a super-trusting Christian with a perfect prayer -life.

So a simple piece of wisdom with such reasonable fears is ‘don’t be afraid of being afraid.’ Let it be. And be honest with God about it. Take it into prayer.

But there’s a **third thing** we can do with our fears, having first checked the facts to hopefully relativise the intensity of our fear, and then second, perhaps having to face the rationality of our fear, but ‘not being afraid of being afraid’ and being honest with God about it. This third thing to do is to draw on this motif of the Transfiguration, and seek to place our experience of fear in the bigger reality, the deeper truth, of the presence and glory of God. We ‘let go’ into God, hand ourselves over into the hands of Love. It’s what I call ‘a place of greater safety,’ not because it gives us any guarantee of a happy ending but because it puts us beyond the panic or paralysis of our fear. It puts us into God’s hands.

Peter, James and John were speechless after their experience on the mountain. Luke says ‘they kept silent in those days and told no-one of what they had seen.’ It was too big an experience to compute (not that they had computers). But they had the solemn confidence of who Jesus really was. They ‘heard’ (in whatever way) the voice of God saying, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; will you listen to him.’ That was the bigger reality, the deeper truth, in which they now lived, and which formed the backdrop of their days.

So for us. We can be taken to a place beyond many of our fears, to this place of greater safety where we ‘let go’ into God. It means facing our fear, looking at it, understanding it, accepting it - and then going **through** it to the other side where the greatest reality is God’s loving presence, ‘a love that will not let you go’.

It’s like passing through a waterfall, and finding ourselves in that place behind the curtain of water, where all is calm, and the ferocity of the water can’t drown us. I remember doing that once and standing in the dry safety of a cave on the other side of the torrent; it was wonderful.

As we release ourselves into God this is when we know the truth of St Paul’s famous assurance in Romans ch 8 that ‘*nothing, neither death nor life, not things present nor things to come, nor height not depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord*.’ Nothing. In an ultimate sense we are safe, because we are ‘in Christ’, in the one who God loves and declares to be his beloved Son. It’s what I’m calling the place of greater safety.

Finding our way to this place doesn’t happen automatically. It may be quite a struggle, because its realistic, not magic. But through there, on the other side of the waterfall, is the peace that passes all understanding – that famous phrase we don’t usually examine for what it means. *The peace that passes all understanding*. I’ve seen it in people facing death and people facing dangerous operations. We’ve seen it in people doing heroic acts of service in risky situations. They’re not a different breed of people; they’re ordinary people who have found their way to an extraordinary place.

Jesus knew what it was like to be afraid. In Gethsemane his fear was so acute that his sweat looked like drops of blood as he agonised over what the next day would bring. But he found his way through the fear, and from then on he never looked back. He found that place of greater safety.

As we face the implications of Russia’s brutal and tragic invasion of Ukraine we can first check the facts, and yes, it’s scary. So, second, we can admit that, and not be afraid of being afraid. But thirdly we might keep going, and trust the bigger reality, the deeper truth, of the presence and love of God, the place of greater safety.

And from there, let us pray for peace in Ukraine and in Europe, not trying to persuade God it’s a good idea (he knows that) but aligning ourselves with his will for peace, and putting our love, our desire, alongside his. Making our loving intention available to him and to the world. We must pray daily for peace; put our heart into God’s heart and extend the kingdom of peace.

Do you remember last week’s gospel, the stilling of the storm? What Jesus said to his followers then was ‘Why are you afraid?’ Gently, he says it to us now. And he invites us to a better place, the place of **greatest** safety.