

(Deuteronomy 25:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13)

Land. Territory. Security. Peace. In our first reading we were reminded that the ancient people of Israel were bidden to offer to God the first-fruits of the land they believed in their hearts they had been given to possess. We know in our hearts the contentious reality of that claim by God's 'chosen people', a contentious reality which has remained to this day. Two nations, Israel and Palestine, uncomfortably occupy the same territory in an uneasy truce.

We know, too, as our second reading affirms, that in God's sight 'there is no distinction between Jew and [Gentile]'. All are justified in God's sight by faith, and not by works of the Law. Indeed, it was St Paul who said, 'just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so the act of righteousness of one leads to justification and life for all'.

Whilst we might wish to interpret Paul's point about 'one man's trespass' as referring not to Adam but to... *you know who*, we will gladly testify that the one whose 'act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all' is Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

And what St Paul had in mind when he referred to Jesus' 'act of righteousness' was his death on the cross: an innocent man dying to take away our guilt. But the theme of his innocence goes back to before his public ministry had even begun: to his forty days of temptation in the desert, outlined in our gospel reading today.

On this first Sunday of Lent we recall that we have begun a forty-day journey to the cross, a journey on which we too are seeking to grow in self-discipline – in innocence – in the face of temptation from every quarter. How we use this penitential season is of course up to us, but our aim surely must be sustained spiritual growth; a closer walk with God. As we strive by God's grace to become ever more Christlike we might say with the psalmist, 'Keep your servant... from presumptuous sins / lest they get dominion over me; / so shall I be undefiled, / and *innocent* of great offence.'

Now, I was struck recently by the words of a teacher from a primary school in an area of social deprivation. She was suggesting that compared with other areas young children coming to her school arrived emotionally under-developed. There are various reasons for this, but the reality is that her school was having to help youngsters to understand their emotions before slowly being able to deal with them. Only then could sustained learning be undertaken and gaps closed.

This reminded me of an insight from the world of psychology which identifies the link between our thoughts, feelings and actions. Our emotions come from deep within us; they have a primal element. We can, however, learn to question our thoughts and change the actions which arise from them.

So let us acknowledge here that the perceived need for land or territory – which symbolise security – is primal in nature: security is a deep human need. But as history

teaches us, two nations cannot peacefully occupy the same territory: there has to be a better way than launching an invasion; a rational way; a just way; dare I say it, a grown-up way.

And if we ourselves feel the emotional urge to defend what we regard as ‘our’ territory in a public space – for example, on the road – we have the opportunity at the ‘thoughts’ stage to intervene so that the resultant ‘action’ does not bring disaster upon ourselves or others. This means that for those of us caught in a seemingly endless cycle of disaster caused by our emotions there is hope! Otherwise, as has been said, ‘if we always do what we’ve always done, we’ll always get what we always got’...

Given the current situation in Ukraine there will be many of us, not least the Ukrainians themselves, for whom fear will be dominating our feelings. But as I say, we have a choice as to how to deal with those feelings of fear, and that choice – as with any feeling – can be informed and influenced by the way Jesus responded to feelings deep within his human heart. His experience in the desert, like any empty place where our ‘demons’ rise to the surface, show that he was able to respond rationally and in a grown-up way to temptation.

A prosaic example for our world this Lent. Perhaps you have given up chocolate. If so, no doubt you can now think of little else, and you are imagining how nice it would be to enjoy the taste and texture even of one small block of chocolate! Indeed, it will probably take all your will-power not to call in to the shop on the way home... But you know that eating even a small block of ‘divine’ chocolate would break the very fast you have undertaken in order to focus on truly ‘divine things’. A rational intervention, an ability to see the bigger picture, will bring about a different outcome – and in just a few weeks’ time you will be able to enjoy that Easter egg all the more!

Jesus, in facing up to the reality of his temptations in the desert knew that if something feels wrong then it *is* wrong, and he therefore knew what the right response should be.

Whoever we are, and whatever the impact on others of the temptations we are facing, it is surely better to break the thoughts-feelings-actions cycle at some point rather than not at all. Our prayer must be that Vladimir Putin can be given – and accept – a way to cease hostilities and enter into meaningful negotiations. The alternative is for him progressively to become deeply mired in his dangerous path, a path he surely feels to be wrong if only because it simply cannot bring him the security he craves.

And at the other extreme, if we do stop off at the shop on our way home to buy some chocolate but manage not to eat it, congratulations in advance! That thoughts-feelings-actions cycle will again have been well and truly broken, and we will still be ‘innocent of great offence’!

This Lent, may our walk with God bring us closer to him who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Thanks be to God. Amen.