

Easter 3, 1st May 2022

Acts 9:1-6 (& John 21:1-19)

As hard as I've tried this past week, I've not been able to pull myself away from the opening line of today's Acts reading: "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples."

I think it was the news headline, late on Wednesday evening (never really a good thing to look at just before going to bed). Vladimir Putin hinted he would use nuclear weapons if the West intervened against his forces in Ukraine. I don't know how you reacted, but this 'murderous threat', like other news coming out of Ukraine, caused shivers up and down my spine; it was, and still is, a very frightening thing to hear.

Mark Greene, of the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (or more conveniently, LICC) last week published a short article¹ about praying for Putin that I found helpful.

He starts by referring to King David's Psalm 5 v 9:

**'Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;
Their heart is filled with malice.
Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.'**

Remind you of anyone?

Mark Greene writes: 'There's nothing like a real-life dictator who is indifferent to the misery and mayhem he wreaks to bring David's conflict psalms to life. Indeed, whilst it is deeply unwise to suppose that God is on any particular side in a war, there are times when, despite our own sinfulness and rebellion, the evil of one side is so clear that we can be as sure as any human can that God stands against it. Verse six of the same Psalm says, 'The bloodthirsty and the deceitful you, Lord, detest.'

How we then pray for Putin is another question. In the weeks before the war, Mark Greene says he prayed that God might raise up an Esther to whisper restraint into Putin's life. He prayed that God might humble him as God humbled Nebuchadnezzar. And he hoped that the Lord in his mercy was not using Putin like the King of Assyria to discipline us for our rebellion (Isaiah 7:17).

As ever, the psalms help us pray. Mark Greene writes:

'First, we must be honest, as David is – calling out the actions and attitudes of his enemies as he sees them. Putin is a self-absorbed, conscience-less, cunning despot and many of us have no doubt felt, as Bonhoeffer did in relation to Hitler, that his death would be the swiftest way to reduce the suffering of literally tens of millions of people. Greene wrote that he finds no contradiction in praying for his salvation and his removal from power, though finds himself unable to ask for his death.

¹ <https://licc.org.uk/resources/praying-for-putin/>

‘Second, the psalmists are honest with God about their vengeful, murderous feelings towards their enemies. We may well have similar feelings. And whilst it is right to repent of them swiftly, it is also right to express them to God – God knows anyway. And when we don’t process such feelings about our enemies, it only gets harder to genuinely want God’s best for them.

‘Third, the Psalmist reminds us that we are not in control. God is. And justice will indeed one day be done. In the meantime, we pray for a swift resolution to the war, the protection of the innocent, wisdom and courage for our leaders, homes for the refugees, and healing for all from the ravages of this diabolic tyranny.’

Let’s not give up praying. In Romans 16:20 the apostle Paul writes, ‘The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.’

Returning to the Acts reading, I’m pretty sure that prayer was something the disciples in Damascus were doing when they received reports that Saul, with his murderous threats, was on route to have them taken as prisoners back to Jerusalem.

But he suddenly finds himself confronted by Jesus through a blinding light and a voice from heaven. Faced with someone whom he is convinced is dead, Saul is thrown to the ground and blinded.

When Ananias, a disciple in Damascus, prays for Saul three days later ‘something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes’ and at last he could see, not just physically, but spiritually as well.

Ananias had been told by God that ‘this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel’ (Acts 9:15). The rest of his life would be spent doing just that, reinforced by changing his Jewish name, Saul, to a Greek one, Paul.

Paul had an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus (as Paul insists - see 1 Cor. 9:1 and 15:8); this not only changed him - his conversion - but it also dramatically changed the direction of his life.

I hope you are encouraged by today’s Bible passages. Someone who breathed murderous threats, even someone who today still breathes murderous threats, is not beyond the reach of God’s love. You or I may not be like Paul (or even Putin), but we each need to encounter the risen Jesus and allow him into our lives to change us, to convert us, to transform us into the people he wants us to be.

As we pray for Putin, for all those in positions of power and authority, as we pray for ourselves, our families and friends, remember that no one is beyond the reach and restorative power of God’s love.

Amen.

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