

WEEKLY REFLECTION

Lent 1C, 2022, Luke 4:1-13

The Promise of Presence

Vladimir Korotkov

Jewish humour

The Evil Spirit once came dejected before God and wailed, "Almighty God -- I want you to know that I am bored -- bored to tears! I go around doing nothing all day long. There isn't a stitch of work for me to do!"

"I can't understand you," replied God. There's plenty of work to be done only you've got to have more initiative. Why don't you try to lead people into sin? That's your job!"

"Lead people into sin!" muttered the Evil Spirit contemptuously. "Why Almighty God, even before I can get a chance to say a blessed word to anyone [they] has already gone and sinned!"

Dan Clendenin, *Journey with Jesus*, writes:

Wherever it comes from, the tempter/tester does not have the power to make someone do something evil. Temptation is not coercion. "To tempt" means to try and convince someone to do something. It means enticing someone to want to do something. Tempters can't make someone do something bad ... they try to change one's will.

1. Ukraine 1933-1942

Ukraine, Village of Chervoy

25 January 1933

Since Maria had decided to die, her cat would have to fend for itself. She'd already cared for it far beyond the point where keeping a pet made any sense. Rats and mice had long since been trapped and eaten by villagers. Domestic animals had disappeared shortly after that. All except for one, this cat, her companion which she'd kept hidden. Why hadn't she killed it? She needed something to live for; something to protect and love – something to survive for. She'd made a promise to continue feeding it up until the day she could no longer feed herself. That was today. She'd already cut her leather boots into thin strips, boiled them with nettles and beetroot seeds. She'd dug for earthworms, sucked on bark. This morning in a feverish delirium she'd gnawed the leg of her kitchen stool ...

Tom Rob Smith, **Child 44**, p 1

Maria's story, which begins Tom Rob Smith's novel *Child 44*, a thriller set in Stalinist Russia in the 1950s, is based on the real famine, the *Holodomor*, translated as the Terror-Famine, in the Ukraine in 1932-33. Around 5 million Ukrainians died unnecessarily.

Their poverty was produced by Stalinist political and imperialist policy, which was to take the Ukrainian grain harvest and store it in other regions of the Soviet Union.

Soldiers were positioned on the border between the two areas to keep Ukrainians out! Russia had colonised the Ukraine for hundreds of years.

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, brigades of special agents were dispatched to Ukraine to enforce, punish and shoot looters.

My mother was about 6 years old in 1933, living in a village in her motherland, the Ukraine.

Though always very careful when she shared her stories of life in the Ukraine, she retold this one.

She recalled her traumatic memory of lying on a bed between her mother's legs as she watched her die of hunger; all her siblings had died; she was orphaned. And she always reminded us of the cherished one piece of black bread that was her only food for the week.

Then, the Nazi's thundered through the Ukraine in mid-Summer of 1941. And around 1942, my mother, then about 15yrs-old, was rounded up, like many Ukrainian-Russian young people, stacked into cattle carriages and trained into Germany/Austria. We know very little of this time; then, out of the rubble of 1945, she emerged as a displaced person in Salzburg, Austria.

2. In this wilderness experience, how shall we then live?

As a Ukrainian-Russian-Australian, I have really struggled as I have watched the people of the Ukraine face and suffer yet another phase of yet another unjust and cruel invasion.

In witnessing the ongoing story, on our 24-hour news exposure, I have wept, been deeply angered, despaired, faced the gray-space of numbness, felt powerless, and nothingness!

This experience has thrown me into my wilderness experience. I am tempted to hate! To despair! To succumb to powerlessness. To give up on democracy! To give up on diplomacy and faith in the fragile world order! To ask, Jesus where are you in this? Where is God in this?

I am tempted to give up my faith in humanity, in God, in life, and even in myself.

And to add salt to my wounds, the Christian lectionary year that we have just moved through has shared some of the most challenging teachings of Jesus: love your enemy, do good to those who hate you!

So, do I just grit my teeth, put aside my real feelings, deny the horror and injustice, and just obey this teaching? Chaos, wild-ness, turbulence, liminality, within my life, out in the world.

How shall I then live?

3. The Promise of Presence

And then, through this last week, in my meditation time, I remembered my mother and how she coped with her wilderness experiences.

She recalled some events of atrocity and survival. Of being guided through the bombing of Kyiv during Nazi occupation in 1941, and how a Ukrainian soldier kept returning for her and guiding her from one safe space to another. Of course, there were others who were blown to pieces. She always wept as she told stories. Yet, over time and reflection, she had come to forgive and let go of fear and hate. She noted the bravery of her people. She believed God was with them, even as God judged the invaders. And their judgement did come!

It came to me so deeply, that we always have the promise of the presence of God. As in the teaching on the Sermon on the Plain in Luke: Blessed are the poor; when we are poor, in desperate situations we are loved and cared for by God; and even if the

invaders, the torturers, the bullies do their awful “thing”, they are judged and we will do the right thing and love the enemy in a way to demand equality and justice, keeping our love alive. As Jesus enters his wilderness experience, the Spirit of God is with him; and he still has to address his wilderness, he use of power.

We are called to keep, and learn, to build relationships even with the enemy, not to create rock-hard opposition. We are a humanity together, yes, even in our differences. At the moment there is an unbridgeable gap between the Ukraine and Russia, between the West and Russia. Yet, we are to seek to create equality and power sharing! And we need God’s presence with us to guide and sustain us on this challenging journey.

Tony Wright’s article in the SMH, *The memories that fire the courage of Ukraine’s freedom fighters*, was a reminder that the “enduring memories within the Ukraine story” are a powerful source of encouragement and couragement. We were blessed to have my mother carry the story of Ukraine in her body and her stories. And though there were days bathed in tears, so many others were expressions of courage, love and faith. God Bless Ukraine!

She lived for us the promise of the presence of the suffering, crucified and risen Christ. Let us enter this time of Lenten Spirituality and our wilderness, accompanied by the Spirit of Truth and Challenge, and learn how to express our power equally, and transform the temptations.