

Pastoral Letter April 2022. Revd Sue Cooper writes:

Dear Friends,

It is good to welcome the longer daylight hours, and it's good to look forward to celebrating the festival of Easter. Easter is the greatest of the Christian festivals during which we remember with joy and thanksgiving Jesus' victory of good over evil and life over death. This year more than ever we cling to these gospel truths. We have seen so much pain and suffering on our television screens as we have witnessed, from a distance, the horror of the invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces, which has resulted in an exodus of many women, children and elderly folk who are now refugees and displaced by war. There are many more millions left behind living (and dying) in war zones and under siege. With so much evil and death set before us every night in the news it's hard to even contemplate that good will triumph, and that life conquers death. But we must hold onto our hope, as we know that evil has its day, but that Jesus came to defeat it.

Sacrifice is a word that we don't hear very often, we hear it on Remembrance Sunday as we remember the fallen of the Wars, but perhaps the only other time we recall the word "sacrifice" is in conjunction with Good Friday, when Jesus died on a cross. Jesus said "*Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" Jesus did this for us; he sacrificed himself for us, and laid down his life. To lay down your life is the ultimate sacrifice, and most of us will never do this, but the people in Ukraine are now living with this sacrifice daily; men and women who, just a few short weeks ago, were living ordinary lives. They were working, cooking, gardening, and living just like us, but who are now hiding or fleeing, or having to take up arms to defend their homeland and their freedom.

We can barely believe it, especially after the World's battle with Covid, where globally everyone has worked together for the good of all, and many sacrifices have been made in order for the majority of us to survive. But this is a very dark day in history. The vast majority of Russian people will not want this conflict, they will not want to lose their loved ones either. But sadly some World leaders give their people misinformation and lead them into conflicts that they really do not want to be involved in, and we have all learnt that from history. However, the thing that shines brightly in this dark day is the bravery and integrity of the Ukrainian people...which is clear for us all to see. Our hearts break for them, and we must do everything we can realistically do to help. Everyone's response to this crisis will be different according to our own situations and challenges in life. But the question is: is there any hope for the future? Can things change?

The answer is yes, **things can and do change**. I am writing this on March 22nd and by the time you read this events in Ukraine will have changed somewhat. Recently things changed for Nazanin Raghari-Ratcliffe. After six long years of being held prisoner our prayers have been answered and Nazanin has been released, which is wonderful news. But we cannot rest on our laurels because, we can never truly be free until all people are free (a sentiment echoed by Nazanin herself), and we can never truly be at peace... until peace is a reality for everyone.

The people of Ukraine are sacrificing everything to remain free, and we stand with them and grieve with them. Sacrifice is painful, messy... and it costs something. In Ukraine the full human cost of this conflict, and the sacrifices made, are not yet known... but behind the cost is a man or a woman, someone's Husband, Wife, Father, Mother, Son, Daughter, Brother or Sister, who has laid down their lives for their friends. It is a terrible reminder that freedom isn't free.

Every year Good Friday reminds us that evil, darkness and death may have its day, but also that it never has the last word. Jesus' resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday reminds us that **love, light and life always triumphs in the end.**

God bless you,

with love Rev Sue.

John 15:12-13 "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."