

Homily. 4th Sunday in Lent. Year. C. 26/27 April 2022.

In the evening of this Friday in Rome, the early hours of our Saturday morning, Pope Francis, Cardinals, Bishops, Clergy, Vowed Religious, along with women and men of faith and good will, gathered to prayerfully consecrate Russia, Ukraine and all of the world to God in the Immaculate Heart of Mary. She, who is Mother of the Lord and of the Church, has always advocated for us, her heart ever open and responsive to our needs and cries.

And, there is much to pray for and cry about at this time in history, not just in Ukraine and Russia, front and centre as that war is, but across the planet in every nation and society. Wars, civil strife, injustices, corruption, violence, greed, ecological disasters, hunger, pandemics and societal disintegration abound. It is the grave crisis in Eastern Europe though that has finally tipped everyone into the realisation that things are far from well, beyond our powers to manage and much in need of God's mercy and healing.

Reading the Pope's Official Consecration Prayer to Mary's Immaculate Heart on the Vatican website, something I think we should all do, the first paragraphs put me in mind of our powerful gospel parable. The prayer begins as follows;

*O Mary, Mother of God and our Mother, in this time of trial we turn to you. As our Mother, you love us and know us: no concern of our hearts is hidden from you. Mother of mercy, how often we have experienced your watchful care and your peaceful presence! You never cease to guide us to Jesus, the Prince of Peace.*

*Yet we have strayed from that path of peace. We have forgotten the lesson learned from the tragedies of the last century, the sacrifice of the millions who fell in two world wars. We have disregarded the commitments we made as a community of nations. We have betrayed peoples dreams of peace and the hopes of the young. We grew sick with greed, we thought only of our own nations and their interests, we grew indifferent and were caught up in our selfish needs and concerns. We chose to ignore God, to be satisfied with our illusions, to grow arrogant and aggressive, to suppress innocent lives and to stockpile weapons. We stopped being our neighbour s keepers and stewards of our common home. We have ravaged the garden of the earth with war and by our sins we have broken the heart of our heavenly Father, who desires us to be brothers and sisters. We grew indifferent to everyone and everything except ourselves. Now with shame we cry out: Forgive us, Lord!*

*Holy Mother, amid the misery of our sinfulness, amid our struggles and weaknesses, amid the mystery of the iniquity that is evil and war, you remind us that God never abandons us, but continues to look upon us with love, ever ready to forgive us and raise us up to new life. He has given you to us and made your Immaculate Heart a refuge for the Church and for all humanity. By God s gracious will, you are ever with us; even in the most troubled moments of our history, you are there to guide us with your tender love. We now turn to you and knock at the door of your heart. We who are your beloved children.*

While this Consecration goes on this is enough to see that both sons of the parable are alive and kicking in us; devoted but resentful, wasteful but repentant. There lives in each of us a Pharisee and Scribe along with a Tax Collector and Sinner, both standing before Jesus, but ill at ease before each other.

Beyond and deeper than this though, neither the elder nor the younger son, neither the Scribe nor the Sinner understood the Father who loved them both just as they were, for what they were with all of His heart. This Father, our God, is the true prodigal in the gospel story. He loved both of His children lavishly and utterly, and respecting their freedom gave them all they wanted, no questions asked and with no recompense required.

If we can manage, with reliance on God's grace, to get the Prodigal Father's way more clearly focused in our minds, more deeply ingrained into our souls, into our thinking and our living, then peace and reconciliation has a hope for us.

If not, then the madness of Mutually Assured Destruction and the law of the jungle is all that's left for us and for our world. As it was with the Father's 2 sons in the parable, He frees us, invites, encourages, waits for and even cajoles us to come into the feast of life. But now as then, the choice and response is ours to make.