

Archbishop Justin joined with Christians from across Europe for an online Advent Prayer Service for peace in Ukraine. Visiting Ukraine last month, he met with the leaders of its churches spending time with the Anglican community there, as well as Christians from other churches. Following the visit Archbishop Justin said 'This visit left me even more determined to stand in solidarity with Ukrainian Christians and all the heroic people of this country. I was deeply struck by the bravery, resilience and faith of the people I met.'

Read the full text of Archbishop Justin's homily here:

Advent is a time of preparation and waiting. It's a time when we prepare to celebrate that world changing moment when Jesus Christ, God Himself burst into human history.

And that gave birth to a new era in history. One where we look forward to the completion of a kingdom of truth and justice and peace and light - God's Kingdom raining on earth when Jesus returns.

We all need this message, we all need to prepare. And we all need it especially at a time when round the world so many are caught up in devastation and war and poverty and struggle. And that's why this evening we think of Ukraine.

As the Russian invasion continues and the chaos and the evil that has been released – all the forces of hell – are visited on that courageous people.

Recently, Bishop Robert and I and some others visited the Anglican community there, as well as Christians from other churches. It was a tiny gesture of solidarity with a suffering yet courageous people.

It was about saying to them, you're not forgotten. We pray for you. We support you. We stand with you, we'll advocate for you.

And during that visit, we stood by a mass grave in Bucha. We heard the stories of those who lived through unspeakable atrocities. We visited a destroyed bridge outside Kyiv blown up by the Ukrainian army to slow the Russian advance. The broken bridge was lined with crosses marking those who were killed as they sought to escape.

We saw the damage of Russian missiles to buildings in a Baptist seminary nearby. We sat in a bomb shelter during an air raid alert, listening to faith leaders talking about their experiences of the horrors of all out war, of a nation in total war. And their hope and determination to stand.

As we gather tonight, many of us in warmth and safety, but also with our own troubles, we remember that winter has been weaponized by the bombing campaign in Ukraine.

Many have opened their doors to Ukrainian refugees torn from their homes, often family members killed, living without certainty. These are the evils that wars of aggression unleash.

So what does Christmas, what does Advent, what does the return of Christ mean at a time like this? How do we respond as a church?

Hundreds of years, five to six hundred years before Jesus Christ, Isaiah prophesied that justice and peace will come at some point, that weapons will be turned into ploughshares.

And yet we stand amidst godless leaders ruling by violence and fear. Armies struggling by night. The people at the time of Isaiah were living in a similar world, in the shadow of death in darkness, in exile, in suffering, in famine and torture.

But Isaiah tells them that a child will be born – the Prince of Peace – and Jesus tells us that He will return. This brings hope. It brings the hope that

the light is shone into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

John, in his gospel: "In the beginning the Word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us." Advent - expectation, hope, light in the darkness, the rule of truth, peace and light to come in God's time.

We are to take that light of hope into the world around us. We are to talk of justice and peace and live it in our church. There's a struggle: we're to put aside our rivalries and pains. We're to put aside our hatreds for others, especially for other Christians.

Let me tell you a story. One of the people who really struck me in Ukraine was a man who leads a seminary, Ivan. He's a Baptist minister. He has a PhD and I asked him what it was in. He said missiology – the way in which the church reaches out in obedience to Christ's command to do so.

He spoke of that reaching out. I said how's the war affected your thinking? He said, "In one way: especially I've realised deep within me that for the church to be effective in reaching the world with the good news of Jesus Christ, it has to bear the scars of the society around it.

Just think of that, how was Jesus recognised after his resurrection, most often by the scars on his hands and feet and side.

The church is not a place of retreating from the world. The church, the Body of Christ, is a place that brings the reality of Christ who came, and died, and rose, and ascended, and will come back. To bring that extraordinary story into the world.

And in doing that, to engage with the world so that we bear its scars.

Ukraine spoke deeply to me, passionately, of a church enduring with the people who endured, not separate, not privileged, not special, but full of love and of the grace of God.

I think in these acts of service and love the words of John's gospel resonate yet to all those who received him to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God, born of God.

I think this helps us see once again the profound meaning of Christmas. The birth, the life, the teaching, the miracles, the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Those are the foundations on which this revolution which we call the church was built.

Christmas is a key turning point for that revolution. And the revolution that came at Christmas – of light in the world – is alive now in churches shining into the darkness.

May the Prince of Peace come again soon. May His transcendent justice prevail. In this time, which is so dark for so many, we all are called to live as his disciples. Let us pray that we can indeed be a light and be those who dispel the darkness and bring the hope of Christ.

6 min read

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