

Worcester Diocesan Synod March 2022

A Presidential Address by Bishop John

Friends, we shall be discussing some important matters today but the thing which is at the forefront of our hearts and minds, and which does not appear on the agenda is Ukraine. I feel I must say something about the unfolding tragedy there.

Our screens are filled with it. Much is said in attempting to explain it by political commentators. They tell us that Putin seems to feel that Russia is under threat from NATO, that he regarded the speed with which so many former soviet states joined that organisation as a provocation. What is missed, as so often, is the religious dimension. It seems to me that this is essential to understanding what has led Vladimir Putin to embark on the invasion of an independent sovereign state. Mad he may be, but if he is suffering from madness, it is a religious mania.

To understand where he is coming from, we need to go back to the times of another Vladimir, Vladimir the Rus. To explain I'm going to draw on Giles Fraser. I don't always agree with him, but I do on this!

In the year 988, threatened by an uprising of his treacherous generals, the Christian Emperor Basil II, based in the glorious city of Byzantium, reached out to his enemies, the pagans over in the land of the Rus. Basil II was a clever politician. If Vladimir of the Rus would help him put down the revolt, he would give him the hand of his sister in marriage. This would be a status changer for Vladimir: the marriage of a pagan to an imperial princess was unprecedented. But there was a condition: Vladimir would have to convert to Christianity.

Returning to Kyev in triumph, Vladimir proceeded to summon the whole city to the banks of the river Dnieper for a mass baptism. This is the founding, iconic act of Russian Orthodox Christianity. It was from here that Christianity would spread out and merge with the Russian love of the motherland, to create a powerful brew of nationalism and spirituality. In the mythology of 988, it was as if the whole of the Russian people had been baptised. Vladimir was declared a saint. When the Byzantine empire fell, the Russians saw themselves as its natural successor. They were a "third Rome".

Soviet Communism tried to crush all this — but failed. And in the post-Soviet period, thousands of churches have been built and re-built. Though the West thinks of Christianity as something enfeebled and declining, in the East it is thriving. Back in 2019, Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, boasted that they were building three churches a day.

At the heart of this post-Soviet revival of Christianity is Vladimir Putin, for whom the invasion of Ukraine is a spiritual quest. The Baptism of Rus is the founding event of the formation of the Russian religious psyche, the Russian Orthodox church traces its origins back here. That's why Putin is not so much interested in a few Russian-leaning districts to the east of Ukraine. His goal, terrifyingly, is Kyev itself.

He was born in Leningrad — a city that has reclaimed its original saint's name — to a devout Christian mother and atheist father. His mother baptised him in secret, and he still wears his baptismal cross. Since he became President, Putin has cast himself as the true defender of Christians throughout the world, the leader of the Third Rome. His relentless bombing of ISIS, for example, was cast as the defence of the historic homeland of Christianity. And he will typically use faith as a way to knock the West, like he did in this speech in 2013:

“We see many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.”

Putin regards his spiritual destiny as the rebuilding of Christendom, based in Moscow. Speaking of Vladimir's mass baptism, Putin explained: “His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.” He wants to do the same again. And to do this he needs Kyev back.

“The spiritual choice made by St Vladimir still largely determines our affinity today” Putin wrote only last year. “In the words of Oleg the Prophet about Kyev, ‘let it be the mother of all Russian cities’”.

Into this religious intensity we can add some angry church politics. In 2019, the Ukrainian arm of the family of Orthodox churches declared its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church — and the nominal head of the Orthodox family, Bartholomew I of Constantinople, supported it. The Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, described this as “a great victory for the devout Ukrainian nation over the Moscow demons, a victory of good over evil, light over darkness”.

The Russian Orthodox Church furiously rejected this claim to independence, stating that Ukraine belonged irrevocably to its “canonical territory”. This led to a historic split within the Orthodox family, with the Russian church rejecting the primacy of Bartholomew, declaring that they were no longer in communion with the rest of the Orthodox family. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, denounced Bartholomew as an American stooge. Kirill even claimed the reversion of the Hagia Sophia — originally the global HQ of Orthodoxy — to a mosque in 2020 was “God's punishment”.

There's more could be said about that, but time is pressing. Such is the centrality of Ukraine in general, and Kyev in particular, to the imagination of the Russian church, they have been prepared to fracture the centuries old alliance of Orthodoxy – and go to war. Again and again, it's all about Ukraine, the imagined site of the mother church of the Rus.

The Western secular imagination doesn't get this. Putin is described as mad. Maybe he is, but, as I said before, it is religious mania, which is the most dangerous kind, as we have seen with ISIS. "Ukraine is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space" Putin has said. That's what this is all about, "spiritual space" — a terrifying phrase steeped in over a thousand years of Russian religious history.' We need to remember that as we pray.

Lord have mercy.