

St James, Piccadilly, 3 pm.

REMEMBRANCE AND FAITHFULNESS

In the opening words of our second lesson today, St Paul writes: **“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us”**. I can think of no time, no place over the last hundred troubled years of our world’s history to which this words more precisely apply than to the three Baltic States from 1940 to 1991. This was a half-century not only of loss of sovereignty, but also of utter degradation, personal as well as national, at the hands – or perhaps one should say under the boot - of three successive invasions by two vast world powers of the time: Soviet, Nazi, Soviet. Small nations, they thought, simply do not matter: they can be erased from the map or their resources exploited, depending on which is more convenient. Next month Lithuania takes over Presidency – yes, *Presidency* – of the European Union. It’s a nice thought, which I couldn’t stop myself introducing far ahead of the logic of what I am saying....

Let’s go back to the scriptures. The book of *Lamentations* is one which isn’t that often read in church, but I was delighted to see it come up for our first lesson this afternoon. These words, attributed to Jeremiah, are deeply personal, but they also apply to a city and to a nation. Jerusalem has been destroyed and laid waste. Jeremiah speaks for himself, but also for the prisoners who have been seized from the city and sent into exile. But during all this suffering, hope is not lost. The captive nation acknowledges, even in its suffering, that God is righteous and his judgment just. There is a note of hope that God will restore the nation of Israel. Four chapters at the beginning and end of the book depict the devastation, but centrally chapter 3 celebrates God’s faithfulness in the middle of all this (verse 22): **“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.”**

The miracle is that not only these thoughts, but their reality in concrete fact, have come about in the recent lifetime of all but the youngest of us. **“God is faithful”**, as St Paul wrote in another context (I Cor.1.9).

I first went to the Baltic region in May 1960, perhaps the first British tourist to do so after the lifting of Stalinist travel restrictions, towards the end of my year of study at Moscow University. The British Council had sent me as a member of the first-ever such group of students. I now had permission to visit all three Baltic States, starting in Estonia – but alas this was revoked after two happy days in Tallinn, where folk greeted me almost like a beneficent being from another world. The KGB sent me back to Moscow – and it would be a further 29 years before I could pay my first visit to Lithuania and then to Latvia.

In January 1989 I received an invitation from the late Archbishop of Vilnius, Julijonas Steponavičius. He had just been released from 29 years – yes, *29 years* - of imprisonment without trial and house arrest. Under Mikhail Gorbachev's new dispensation he was freed and one of his first objectives was to re-consecrate the cathedral on Gediminas Square. He invited me; I arrived – after a visa refusal and intervention by the British Foreign Office – to find myself the only official visitor from outside the Soviet Union. The event itself moved me almost more than any previous experience in my life. Subsequent meetings – including with Vytautas Landsbergis, then head of the nascent Sajudis, later to become Lithuania's first democratically elected leader – were inspiring. From my study and writing, not least publishing my book, *Land of Crosses*, about the tribulations of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, I knew that the days of Soviet communism were numbered. Now I saw with my own eyes proof that Lithuania and the other Baltic States would prove the Achilles heel of the system.

I continued that journey to meet Pastor Juris Rubenis, who was doing equally remarkable things in restoring the integrity of the Latvian Lutheran Church. He took me to the Planetarium in Riga – already being reclaimed as the cathedral. On my return I followed and published extracts from the fiercely nationalist sermons of Pastor Harri Mõtsnik in Tallinn. I very soon found myself caught up in the Singing Revolution in Estonia – this time by television and commenting on the radio, rather than by personal involvement.

From independence after 1991 it seems now, looking back, only the blink of an eye to when I was

invited to give a lecture in London to celebrate accession of the Baltic States to the European Union in 2004. The rate of recovery from the devastation of the Soviet period had been remarkable, a political miracle, in my view, of the twenty-first century.

But it's only too easy to look on this cascade of events as merely a political and economic miracle. I am convinced that it was a spiritual miracle as well. God *was* faithful to his people. He responded to the almost superhuman steadfastness of the Baltic people. *Lamentations* 3.24 tells us: **The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him**". Even in the very worst days of persecution, exile, even death at the hands of the oppressor, those thoughts never left the people. The victims of genocide never abandoned their faith in the Creator. As it was written about the memorial to a martyr-priest in Siberia in Stalin's era: **So the story of the exiled pastor came to and end... But though the storm blows over the new and old grave mounds, covering them with snow... still the cherry tree will go on arraying itself anew in its wedding colours every spring, and the path of remembrance, prayer and veneration, which leads to such graves, will never be overgrown.**" Those wonderful words were translated from Russian by my former colleague at Keston College, the late Marite Sapiets, who sadly died last year and who used to attend this annual service. I include them, not only because of what they say, but as a tribute to her memory. I mention Keston, which from the 1960s to the 1990s worked unceasingly for religious freedom in the Baltic States. It operates today; there are a few leaflets at the back of the church which will bring you up to date – or alternatively you can catch up via the Keston website.

All these thoughts are beautifully and deeply emphasised, too, in the three extracts from letters written in communist prisons and read at the beginning of this service. Individuals utterly deprived not only of every human comfort, but also their dignity, focus on God and are convinced of his presence strengthening their faith as they suffer.

During this service we have been overjoyed at the significant presence of children from the three Baltic communities, children born after the events on which I've been concentrating. I conclude with a message for them. Do not forget the sacrifices and the faith of your

parents and grandparents, without which, very likely, you would not be here today; or, without them and your nation, you would still, most likely, like Jeremiah, be bewailing three captive nations. Treasure your freedom, but also treasure your inheritance. Treasure, too, the contribution you can and will make to this nation of Britain. We value you, for yourselves, for what you represent and for the richness of culture and inheritance which you bring to our midst. Do not lose all this; keep two languages and, above all, build on your faith in God, who has been faithful to your people and who will continue to strengthen you, whatever life may bring. God bless you all. Amen.

Michael Bourdeaux

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