

Sermon at St Mary's and St Andrew's on Sunday 13 March 2022 by Rev. Bill Church

(Readings: Psalm 27 & Matthew 23.37-39)

Today's Gospel is an uncomfortable reading for an uncomfortable time. It is an ominous reading for an ominous time.

Before Matthew's Gospel appeared, Jerusalem had been attacked by Rome, besieged, taken and despoiled. The Temple was destroyed. So those who first heard or read this passage would have needed no prompting to understand the strength of Jesus' words, "Your house is left to you desolate".

They would picture their holy city in ruins; they would recall the words in the Book of Lamentations about an earlier sack: "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people."

Or Psalm 59 where murderous foes "snarl like dogs and prowl about the city."

They would think of their city in the same way as the citizens of Aleppo or many cities in Ukraine shed tears over their fate.

One difference would be that the people of Judah in exile became convinced that it was their own failure to follow God

properly which led to the disaster, while today the assault on Ukraine is clearly seen as the outcome of human aggression and the citizens of Kyiv can say from Psalm 27: "False witnesses have risen up against me and those who breathe violence."

The writer of Lamentations was given up to despair, but even in the depths, he realised that despair is not the final destination.

It is not helpful to offer advice to the people of Ukraine on how to regard their grievous plight. If we did that, we would be useless and officious, like Job's comforters.

But what about us when we encounter something evil that we are helpless to counter or lack resources to mend? Mere despair just digs the hole deeper. Can today's Gospel offer some pointers?

Immediately before the passage we have heard, Jesus had launched in to the seven woes: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees" for their many faults and misdeeds. He sounds like an angry Old Testament prophet.

Then in our passage, we find the image of a mother hen. Have you seen a mother hen? She clucks and fluffs up her feathers, she sounds anxious and flustered, and the chicks run to her for shelter. That is a charming picture, homely and almost ridiculous as the self-image for a charismatic leader.

And in Jesus' sad comment – I wanted to mother you, but you were not willing – there is hidden the promise – if you are willing, I will mother you.

And in his warning – you will not see me again until you say: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" – there is hidden the promise – you will see me when the world says: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord"; not at a transitory triumphal entry like Palm Sunday, but when all things are gathered together in God's good time and we will behold the fair beauty of the Lord.

