**13th March 2022**

Come together to seek God.
Come as you are with your joys and sorrows.
Come with your thanks and doubts.
Come with your fears and hopes.
Come together to seek and worship God.

A gathering prayer

Lord, you are our light and our salvation;
our hope in times of fear.
You protect us at times of danger,
and you hear our prayers.
So, Lord, we seek your face,
and we trust in your goodness.

A prayer of approach

Faithful God,
we come to worship you,
conscious of our vulnerability
but rejoicing in your protective love.
Speak your values into our hearts,
your energy into our actions,
and your integrity into our lives,
that we may use our time well and wisely,
and be a church of compassion, conviction and courage.
In Jesus’ name we pray.

A prayer of adoration

Eternal God,
we trust you for today.
Inspire us to stay focused and to follow your plan for our lives.
We trust you for tomorrow.
Empower your people to protect the vulnerable
and to proclaim the truth.
We trust you for every day.
Be with us as we journey through life towards your great heart
of love in which there is no fear, no failure and no limits.
Amen

A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness

A prayer of confession

Dear God,
forgive us when the words we speak expose our self-interest.
Help us, forgive us, and deepen our faith.
Forgive us when the things we do compromise your integrity.
Help us, forgive us, and deepen our faith.
Forgive us when the way we use our resources clashes with
your core values.
Help us, forgive us, and deepen our faith.
For Christ’s sake.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

As a hen covers her chicks with her wings,
so you cover us with your forgiving love:
drawing us into a new beginning,
a new way of being, a new way of serving;
strengthening, sustaining and surrounding us
with your power and your presence
each day of our lives and beyond.
Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

We praise you, loving God,
that you give each of us enough time
to do all that we are called to do.
Take from us the worry of hurry,
and enable us to delight in your presence with us,
and to share our joy with all who are in need
of hope and friendship and courage.
In Jesus’ name we pray – thankfully and hopefully.
Amen.



**Psalm 27,**

**the lectionary psalm for today, was written in deeply troubled times when armies were encamped around them and war was rising (v3). Those verses seem entirely pertinent to the current situation as cities in Ukraine are encircled and, whatever official Russian media may call it, Putin has unleashed war on Ukraine. Some psalms are angry. Some are penitent. Some contain vindictive passages which are hard for us to read. Some are really difficult for people who believe in a God of love. I believe that someone has said that every human emotion can be found in the Psalms. But here in Psalm 27 God, unusually, is described as light in a dark world. Is that light to be found in individual stories of courage?**

A prayer for all ages together

Lord, this week, walk beside us. (*mime walking*)
When we are sad, comfort us. (*mime hugging*)
When we are happy, laugh with us. (*laugh*)
When we are frightened, protect us. (*defensive stance*)
When we fail, help us. (*clasp hands together*)
Lord, this week, walk beside us. (*mime walking*)
Amen.

 **Fox or hen?**

**A way into thinking about our different personalities and qualities**

**Your will need: paper and pens, pencils or crayons.**

**In the Gospel reading, animals – a fox and a hen – are used to describe human personality and character. Invite people to draw pictures of their favourite animals. Then, in small groups, to share with each other the qualities they most admire about their chosen animal, and why.**

**Next, ask people to draw the animal that they think represents their own personality and character. Again, share and say why. What qualities appeal to you most in people**

**Luke 13.31-35**

**Sermon**

Before we got wheelie bins we used to have to leave our rubbish in black bags on the drive ready for collection, first thing next morning. Quite often we will go out on the next morning and find the bags ripped open and maybe the odd chicken carcass abandoned on the grass next to some strange looking poo (with which the children take great fascination in!). All the signs that Mr Fox has been on the prowl.

Jonathon Froggett, the previous Methodist minister in Dursley, used to keep chickens in his back garden. Until one day the fox came.

Foxes and chickens appear in our gospel reading for today, the second Sunday in Lent. Jesus calls King Herod ‘a fox’. Jesus prays for Jerusalem and cries out how he longs to gather up her children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. It is striking imagery.

There are a number of animal images used of God throughout the Bible. Two that are familiar are the lion of the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49.9; Revelation 5.5) and the lamb (John 1.29; Revelation 5.6). Luke 13 gives us one that Jesus applies to himself: the hen that longs to gather her chicks under her wings.

In folktales, animals are often assigned human characteristics. Foxes are seen as cunning and predatory, whereas a chicken is usually stupid and cowardly. In this week’s Gospel reading, Herod is called a fox, but Jesus likens himself to a mother hen. So how apt are these descriptions?

Do Herod and Jesus fit the stereotypes? Herod may be somewhat ‘foxy’, but Jesus is certainly no chicken in the modern conventional sense! And in real life the mother hen is protective, brave and caring. Do we behave like foxes, or hens, or some other animal? And, if so, how would you characterize that animal?

The mothering instinct of hens can be so strong that they sometimes shelter other creatures under their wings, such as kittens or ducklings. This is a powerful image, but not an image of power. Jesus longs to protect people, but not everyone is willing.

The President of Ukraine recently compared his soldiers and the people who are defending his country as ‘lions’. While Herod is a fox, wily and dangerous, Jesus describes himself as a hen. A rallying slogan such as ‘I am lion, hear me roar’ is always popular. How many of us would rally to ‘I am hen, see me gather’?

The Ukrainian president addressed the Houses of Parliament this week and received a standing ovation. His address was described as Churchillian: ‘we will fight them on the beaches , we will never surrender’, and all that.

As the crisis in Ukraine has developed over the last couple of weeks, we have seen countless examples of those who refuse to leave their homes, choosing instead to remain and fight, to remain and report, and to remain and bring aid to those in need. The shouted warning from the Pharisees to Jesus echoes down the ages; ‘Get away from here, (the enemy) wants to kill you!’

People have told President Zelensky that he must flee Kyiv to escape the bombardment. His reply was ‘I don’t want a ride, I want more ammunition’. Like the (British) King George VI in 1940, he refused to go despite the risk. Neither were looking for death but accepting that it could come. They showed courage in the face of fear. Lions indeed!

Throughout Luke’s gospel, Jesus always has Jerusalem as his destination in mind. All roads lead there for him: that is where his mission will end and where his mission will be complete. In Lent, we too head for Jerusalem to re-enact and re-engage with the world changing events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Some Pharisees warn him to be on his way because Herod wants to kill him. Their message allows Jesus to reflect on his destiny and his reply to Herod makes clear that he journeys to Jerusalem to fulfil the will of God not to escape any plot of Herod. Jesus is under a higher authority than Herod. He has work to do – on the third day he will reach his goal – the expression ‘the third day’ will resonate with all Christians.

There is a prediction that Jerusalem will not accept his message. It has history in killing the prophets. Yet that doesn’t stop the compassion of Christ for the city which symbolises the people of God.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was crucified? Most people when they think of Jesus think he’s a nice, gentle guy. He loves the little children. He has nice shiny gold hair. He is the kind shepherd who stands at the entrance of Heaven and welcomes us his flock, home.

There are many times when Jesus gets angry, including this one. Calling the nation’s ruler a ‘fox’ is courting trouble. Jesus was not implying that Herod was sly, rather he was commenting on Herod's ineptitude, or inability, to carry out his threat. Jesus questioned Herod’s pedigree, moral stature and leadership. Herod considered himself a lion, but Jesus pointed out that Herod was the opposite of a lion. Jesus cut Herod down to size, and Jesus' audience may have had an inward smile of appreciation at his telling riposte.

Jesus went around healing the sick, driving out demons, as he says in this passage – but he also went around provoking and upsetting people. He disturbed the ruling elite, those who held onto power and oppressed others. He stood up against those who exploited others and who acted selfishly at the expense of others. He sided with those who were excluded and despised in society. No wonder he got himself crucified.

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In the Gospel (Luke 13.31-35), Jesus says to Jerusalem: 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!'

Are we gripped with the same compassion of Christ for the state of our world and care for those at risk?

In the midst of this war, we are witnessing huge refugee movements in Europe. I have been moved by reports of people opening their homes to refugees, and leaving equipment like push chairs for refugees to use. We can, of course, pray and there are prayers on denominational (C-of-E Archbishops; Methodist Church; United Reformed Church) and other websites which you may want to consider. There is the Disasters Emergency Committee and other appeals for financial help. But beyond that, what else can we usefully do?

And what about all the other stories which have largely disappeared from our news? Conflicts elsewhere in the world have not come to a sudden end. Cameroon and Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso were both in the news before the present war. Afghanistan is still there, as is Myanmar. The conflict in Israel/Palestine is unlikely to be resolved any time soon even as Israel’s Prime Minister seeks to mediate over Ukraine. Tonga will be recovering from the volcano eruption on 15 January for years. And doubtless there are other places which I have not recalled.

The warnings in the recent IPCC report were stark. ‘It is unequivocal that climate change has already disrupted human and natural systems.’. Threats to biodiversity and ecosystems are real and urgent. The window of opportunity for effective action to mitigate the effects of climate change is narrowing fast.

Psalm 27 is written for the fearful. Fear is one of the most disabling emotions. People can literally be rendered unable to move by fear of personal violence whether from terrorists or from invading armies. Fear of a neighbour or an abusive parent can render people unable to think rationally. And media hype can exaggerate people’s fears.

The war hysteria that is building and the demonising of President Putin can lead us down a difficult goodie versus baddie, scenario which can lead to further division and conflict. It would be easy, but facile, to associate Putin with Herod, the fox, as portrayed in today’s gospel. It would be easy but facile to be anti-Russian in all things and in the passion of patriotism compel people to take sides. Fears can do terrible things to people’s reasoning and behaviour.

We have all felt afraid or threatened at times in our lives. You will know the sensation of butterflies in your stomach, difficulties in breathing, heart pounding, and so on. Fortunately, many of our fears are short-lived, unjustified or calmed by those around us. But what if the threat is real – what then? Our bodies are geared either to fight or to flee. So, if in danger and if we think we have no chance of surviving, we run. Have you ever been tempted to run away from something? Most of us have. Sometimes it is the wiser course than trying to face a danger you can’t beat.

Despite the devastating scenes in Kiev, God’s miracles are everywhere and people are hungry for the Word of God, says Anatoliy Raychynets, of Ukrainian Bible Society[[1]](#endnote-1)

We had a lot of attacks today. Since 4am until now. The situation is really difficult. It’s so painful to see.

Day by day, women with small kids are running, here, outside our office, on the street, trying to find a basement to hide themselves from the bombing. Many people are crying out for help to come out of Kiev. I met people yesterday who didn’t have bread for four days. Elderly people who cannot go outside, who have illnesses. They they’re just sitting in their apartments and waiting for a miracle. They call our volunteers “angels” when we find them the medicine and bread they need.

You never feel safe now in Kiev. You can hear shooting. They’re bombing and sometimes it’s so close that I think the Bible Society office is shaking. We don’t know if we are safe inside.

**THE BREAD OF LIFE**

Yesterday, we were outside in a park, delivering bread to people. I had children’s Bibles in my vehicle, to distribute in the basements where women and children were hiding. But one lady saw them and asked: “Are they Bibles? Can I have one please?” And other people – 80 or 90 - just came to the to the car and asked: “Can I have one?” One man, in his 70s, stood there with his bread in one hand and the Bible in his other hand and said: “I think the Bible is more important than daily bread, for me personally now. I never prayed before. I have never been to church, never read the Bible. But now it’s time to come closer to God.” We’ve met so many people in the last two weeks who have never read the Bible or prayed before, but now they’re asking “Are you from the Church? Please pray for us,” - on the streets, at homes, everywhere.

People are searching for faith because they know that a miracle must happen to relieve this situation. We don’t see any diplomatic or other solutions. We just know deep inside us that only God can stop this horrible war.

As a pastor, it’s so painful when you see the suffering of so many people. Thousands of people run to hide in the subway station outside our office; I saw so many women and small children crying, asking for help. One lady said: “Do you have any medicine? My child has a fever and we don’t have anything.” It cuts to your heart. The darkness is so powerful now. It is all evil and darkness here. And then one lady said: “Thank you that you’re bringing light here into this darkness. Thank you for what you’re doing.” And I just remind myself of John 1:1-4 where we read about the light coming into the world: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Darkness never has victory over light. So we bring light. We need to bring more and more light into this horrible darkness.

**PRAYING FOR PEACE**

We are very grateful to all of you who are standing with us in [prayer and solidarity](https://www.premierchristianity.com/prayer/7-ways-to-pray-more-effectively-for-ukraine/6175.article). We see a lot of Christians around the world standing with us, praying for Ukraine, sending help here. But what we are asking and praying for - and asking all our Christians brothers and sisters to tell their governments - we need to lock the sky, because we are losing a lot of lives. Bombs and missiles come from the sky to the cities. You saw the news yesterday from Mariupol, other cities in Ukraine and here in Kiev. It’s our cry. Stand with us in prayer.

I’ve personally seen so many miracles in the last 16 days: bombs falling down or rockets that don’t explode. A lot of lives have been saved because of that. Russian tanks left because they’re empty of fuel, and soldiers running away. In Odessa, on the Black Sea, for four days there has been a big storm and the Russians could not come closer to the city to shoot rockets. So pray. Your prayers are already bringing results. Miracles are saving a lot of lives.

This difficult situation is already changing our nation. It’s changing us our attitude and values. People are standing together, helping each other. I see so much of God’s love here, in spite of war; how people are acting towards each other, sharing small pieces of bread with each other. They are driven by the love of God.

I think Ukraine will come out of this situation a strong Christian nation who believe in God, who trust in God, who pray together. All churches - Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and evangelical – we are standing in prayer together. It’s very powerful. All of us understand that only God’s miracle can stop the war in Ukraine.

[**Anatoliy Raychynets**](https://www.premierchristianity.com/anatoliy-raychynets/1639.bio)Anatoliy Rayc

In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, ‘The Nun’s Priest’ tells the story of a cockerel and a fox. Chanticleer, the cockerel, has a dream that he is about to be in great danger, but his wife ‘pooh, poohs’ it as simply fear caused by indigestion. She persuades him to ignore it. But the wily fox comes upon the cockerel and flatters him by encouraging him to stretch out his neck and sing. Thereupon, he seizes Chanticleer by the throat and runs off – chased by the whole village. But the cockerel is not so stupid as we might have thought. He encourages the fox to shout insults at his pursuers. Carried away by the thrill of the chase he starts to taunt those chasing him. Chanticleer seizes his chance and flutters onto a branch of a tree. Foxes are not as clever, nor chickens as stupid as some folk tales make them out to be!

Psalm 27 ends with a firm conviction that we ‘shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living’ if we ‘wait for the Lord’ (vv13-14).

Christ in our gospel reading displays his judgement and his compassion. Foxes, like Herod, may still slyly woo away the hearts of God's brood. And this is the thing: Jesus is powerless to stop it. He can walk on water and raise the dead, but he cannot make us love him. He desires such love, but he cannot force it. He cannot keep us from slamming the door in his face, defenceless against the many Herods waiting in the shadows.

One of the hardest things in life is loving someone you know you can't shelter or protect. The powerlessness of love.

We have seen how our core values affect our behaviour - some seek to grab what they can, while others are willing to sacrifice their comfort and personal safety for the wellbeing and protection of others. Closer to home, the values of our nation have been called into question as those seeking sanctuary have been turned away.

So what is Jesus' plan? What's he going to do now? Strangely, his plan is to keep offering the love of a mother hen. Keep spreading his wings. He will offer his life to Herod on our behalf. He will follow us into the darkness we have chosen for ourselves, over and over again. He will place himself between that darkness and us.

And if you look closely at this man hanging on the cross, his arms eternally outstretched, the span of his reach on that wood will begin to resemble the loving wings of a mother hen, gathering up her chicks in a love that doesn't make sense but breaks our hearts if we look long enough.

There are stories of how a hen will gather up her chicks under her wings to protect them in an event of a farmyard fire. After the fire those cleaning up have found a dead hen, scorched and blackened – with live chicks sheltering under her wings. She has quite literally given her life to save them.

Those people fighting for the defence of their country and their freedom in Ukraine may be thinking the same.

It is a vivid and violent image of what Jesus declared he would do for Jerusalem, and by implication for all Israel and us the new Israel. But all he could see for now was chicks scurrying off in the opposite direction, taking no notice of the smoke and flames, indicating the approach of danger, nor of the urgent warnings of the one who alone could give them safety.

How our society and our world scurries off in opposite directions, ignoring the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of Christ. How Christ seeks to gather them up. How Christ seeks to gather us up in his wings of compassion.

Are you a fox or a hen? A lion or a lamb?

May God grant us light, compassion and wisdom to be who we need to be at any given moment.

May we see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living’ as we ‘wait for the Lord’ (vv13-14).

Prayers of intercession

Save us, O Lord,
from the darkness all around us;
from the darkness within our own hearts;
from the noontide danger
and the shadows of the night.
Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the Lord.

In all areas of unresolved conflict in our troubled world,
where deep-seated grievances and complex history collide,
where shattered lives and destroyed cities are the evidence for our wars
and we feel helpless at so much brokenness:
God of our hope, we place our trust in you.
Help us to walk in your light.

In political decision making on energy, security, aid and sanctions,
where true leadership and wisdom matter,
when government should meet the needs (and not the wants) of the people,
when costly decisions are needed,
and self-interest needs to be set aside for the good of others:
God of our hope, we place our trust in you.
Help us to walk in your light.

In freezing temperatures, as snow falls,
when the homeless, refugees and frightened families shiver in distress,
when our visa policy is too complex and bureaucratic to save the desperate
when, in our relatively affluent country, some go hungry
and many with homes are struggling to stay warm amid rising energy costs,
we know that change is needed:
God of our hope, we place our trust in you.
Help us to walk in your light.

In our relative security and safety in this country.
where we are tempted to trust in our own strength,
when our compassion fails,
when we lack the imagination to walk in the shoes of the dispossessed,
and we lose sight of our own dependence on you:
God of our hope, we place our trust in you.
Help us to walk in your light.

In the mountains of our possessions,
when we spend, acquire and accumulate things that do not lead to life,
and are obsessed with more, bigger and better we forget the needs of others:
God of our hope, we place our trust in you.
Help us to walk in your light.

In the tangled conflicts at home, school or work in which we are trapped,
when we cannot give in and the desire to win is greater than our search for a resolution,
soften our stubborn hearts, we pray:
God of our hope, we place our trust in you.
Help us to walk in your light.

In the absence of safety and home,
when refugees flee to the borders in the pauses between shelling,
when a humanitarian crisis is building and families are torn apart and we fear the fresh horrors of the news:
God of our hope, we place our trust in you.
Help us to walk in your light.

In all our dreams and longings,
where freedom itself is at stake,
and we yearn for a better, fairer and kinder world,
teach us to seek your face and listen to your voice
in all our ways and for all of our days:
God of our hope, we place our trust in you.
Help us to walk in your light.

Save us, O Lord,
from the darkness all around us;
from the darkness within our own hearts;
from the noontide danger
and the shadows of the night.
Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the Lord. Amen.

A sending out prayer

Teach me, Lord God, to live out my faith;
to show courage when things are tough,
to show love to those in need,
and to be forgiving even when I am hurt.
Help me to follow Jesus.
Amen.

1. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/real-life/the-bible-is-more-important-than-bread-to-me-now-ukrainian-christians-report-miracles-in-the-midst-of-war/12671.article?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=13032139_PCTY%20Weekly%20Email%20template&dm_i=16DQ,7RBNV,KCOFX7,VMY17,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)