

'Wars and rumours of wars.' What we feared and expected has happened. Russian forces have crossed the border into Ukraine. It is a peacekeeping mission, says Mr Putin in Moscow. It is an invasion, says Mr Biden in Washington. It is a violation of international law and Ukrainian sovereignty, says Mr Johnson in London.

In 1969 bombs were planted at water and electrical installations in Northern Ireland, leaving much of Belfast without power or water. The bombs were blamed on the IRA but were in fact planted by loyalists. Perhaps the Russians did something similar, blaming Ukrainian forces for bombs they themselves planted, in order to justify the military action they have taken – to protect, they say, ethnic Russians seeking independence from their 'oppressors'. On the other hand, there is little doubt that some ethnic Russians do feel they are the poor relations in Ukraine. There is certainly a long history of dispute between Russians and Ukrainians going back several centuries. There are two distinct Orthodox denominations in Ukraine, so even the church has not escaped conflict in the area.

Jesus said, 'Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.'

There is a nation – let it remain nameless – whose military has a tendency to assume that a stranger is an enemy unless they prove otherwise. This is deep within their psyche and reflects a history of conflict between different ethnic groups within their own land. The British soldier, in contrast, tends to assume, by and large, that the stranger is a friend, unless they prove otherwise.

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After the Cold War came to an end, intelligence services were surprised to learn that the Soviet Union really did believe, mistakenly, that NATO had aggressive intentions. Some historians tell us that the Russians wanted to play a part in European life but were rather left in the cold by the west, who did not trust them. Did we in some way lay the foundations of the present situation by always assuming the Russians are our enemies and treating them as such?

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Russia has previously annexed land in Ukraine: the Crimea peninsular. It is clear that they intend to do so again, if only for the sake of the ethnic Russians wanting independence from Ukraine. Israel did something similar just over half a century ago. Britain... well, need I go on? Our hands are not entirely clean in such matters.

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Whatever is happening in Ukraine, it has to be seen through the lens of Jesus' teaching, and all he teaches us about the nature of God. There has been an illegal act, which should not be overlooked, especially as other nation states may be at risk. But the reaction should not lead to further misery. Sanctions are better than an escalation of war – a long as we remember that financial sanctions can lead to hunger and poverty amongst innocent people, while the rich and powerful are able to cushion themselves and remain rich and powerful.

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It is easy to hiss the villain, but this is no pantomime. It is a catastrophic event involving the lives of ordinary people, and blood has already been shed. I don't know how this crisis will end; I suspect some sort of stalemate, for good or ill. But this I do know: that God is in the midst of every human situation, and that nothing can separate us, or the Ukrainian people, or the Russian people, or indeed Mr Putin himself, from the love of God, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Help me, O Lord, to make peace where I am.
To turn dividing walls into bridges,
And bring friendship to the place of strife,
To be a neighbour to those near at hand
And those far away,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

(Churches Together in Britain and Ireland)

Peter