

## **Sermon: The Alpha and the Omega**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, April 24, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is much upheaval in the worldwide Orthodox Church. On the eve of Easter in the Orthodox calendar, the Church finds itself hopelessly divided over the Russian invasion in Ukraine.

Kirill, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church is openly supportive of Putin's war, describing it as a bulwark against the decadent West. Kirill also claims Ukraine as an indivisible part of his spiritual jurisdiction. Whereas Putin may see his 'special operation' in Ukraine as a political restoration to the former glory of the Soviet empire, the Patriarch of Moscow seems to see the war as a crusade. The position that Kirill has taken has enraged the Orthodox churches outside of Russia.

Bartholomew, the Constantinople based Ecumenical Patriarch who acts as the first among equals in the Orthodox world, has already condemned Kiril's support of the war. However, since the Orthodox Church is loosely organized in autonomous blocks, there isn't much that Bartholomew could actual do to Kirill, nor to stop the war, even for a little while during their Easter celebration.

Rev. Taras Khomych, a senior lecturer in theology at Liverpool Hope University, and a member of Ukraine's Byzantine-rite Catholic Church, describes the mood of the 100 million or so members of the Russian Orthodox Church. This is what he told Reuters in a telephone interview recently: "Kirill has simply discredited the Church. More people want to speak out in Russia but are afraid."

I guess I could understand their fear, even sympathize. Against a ruthless dictator who holds all levers of power, who has demonstrated an absolute willingness to put down any dissent, even to the point of killing dissidents, who would have the courage to speak out, to stand firm? That is why the story we read in today's Scriptural passage, describing the scene of the disciples of Jesus showing remarkable courage before the court of Sanhedrin, is truly astounding.

The church in Jerusalem was in its infancy. The disciples of Jesus had emerged, post resurrection, as nascent leaders of a fast growing

movement that some were calling it 'The Way'. They were openly proclaiming the Gospel, the good news that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, crucified on the cross, but now raised from the dead. What was even more unbearable, to the religious authority of the day, was these disciples of Jesus (apostles now called) were doing so openly in the temple courts, and many were flocking to them. So the high priest and his cronies had them arrested, thrown in jail, about to face trial. However, in the middle of the night, an angel of the Lord came and opened the jail door. The apostles did not flee, rather, they went back out to the temple courts, and resumed teaching the people.

After much confusion, the apostles were finally brought in before the Sanhedrin, to be questioned by Caiaphas, the high priest. "*We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,*" he said. "*Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.*" (Acts 5:28) This is the same Caiaphas who sent Jesus to Pontus Pilot to be tried for treason. This is the same high priest who made numerous false accusations against Jesus before Herod. This is the same religious authority that so inflamed the crowd in shouting 'crucify!' Of course he, and they, are guilty of this man's blood—this man being Jesus. Note they couldn't even mention his name, as if it was beneath them. Caiaphas and his associates had engineered the death of Jesus, and they would have given no second thought to put down Peter and the rest of the apostles.

Now Peter, who had not too long ago, denied even knowing Jesus, three times in the courtyard of the high priest. Peter is the one who led the reply: "*We must obey God rather than human beings!*" (Acts 5:29) We must! No ifs or buts or should....we must! These once frightened disciples who were not too long ago, cowering behind a closed door have now emerged from hiding as fierce and fearless apostles. In the face of persecution, arrest, and their own possible martyrdom, they could not stop talking, singing, and proclaiming Jesus. We must, they said.

What happened? Who or what had engineered that transformation? Faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the answer. What changed these cowering disciples into brave apostles was the conviction that their crucified Lord is alive. Death did not defeat him, therefore there was no reason to fear anything, not even death. What had transformed these disciples was the same truth that had propelled giants of faith, people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. The same truth that also raises up ordinary men and women to live

their lives with courage, compassion, faith and hope in the midst of suffering, illness, oppression and injustice. The truth of the Easter message is this: **love is strong than hate, life is stronger than death, the battle has been won. Jesus Christ is alive.**

Hallelujah, praise be to God, who is the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. The Apostle John, in the Book of Revelation, has given us that self-description of God. The Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last Greek letter of the alphabet, signifying the beginning and the end. Capping that self-description of God is 'the Almighty', or in Greek: Pantocrator—panto as 'in all'; kratos as in 'to hold'. God who holds all things together, who is not only the creator of all, but the ruler of all. It is as if should God be unwinded, all creation will fall apart; should God cease, all will cease.

I don't know how the Orthodox Christians around the world could celebrate their Easter today, in the backdrop of much killing and death in Mariupol, Donbas and other regions of Ukraine. Perhaps they could simply look up. Orthodox cathedrals are mostly built with a large dome over the sanctuary. Many of the domes have this familiar mosaic of Christ Pantocrator—depicting Jesus seated in power and glory, surrounded by circles and circles of saints and angels, grasping in his left hand a book with the inscription of Alpha and Omega, and imparting a blessing with his right. Perhaps those Orthodox worshippers could simply look up, or picture in their mind the gaze of Christ Pantocrator, looking down beneficently and powerfully upon them. Perhaps they would remember and find the courage within them to do the right thing.

Perhaps they could take a page out of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, which in 1954 had made this 'Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation'.

“The one Holy Triune God, sovereign Creator and Redeemer,  
has declared and established his kingdom  
over all powers in heaven and earth.  
By the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,  
and by his exaltation to the right hand of the Father,  
all things have been made subject to Him,  
so that even age-long evil is overruled for good.  
We worship and obey Jesus Christ  
as Lord of lords and King of kings,  
Judge and Governor among the nations.

He is both Head of the Church and Head of the Civil State, although their functions under him are to be differentiated, and their relationships to him are not to be confused.”

In the section title “The Church and Tyranny”, this is what it calls for,

“It is the Church’s duty to denounce and resist every form of tyranny, political, economic, or ecclesiastical, especially when it becomes totalitarian. A citizen is not barred from disowning any government or organ of power which usurps the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, and indeed may be obliged by God’s word to rebel against it. But if involved in such action, the Church must remember that the weapons of her warfare are finally out of this world. Led by the Holy Spirit she will in any situation bear public witness to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ and to the freedom of all men in Him.”

I’ll leave with you this final section, as encouragement titled “The Final Manifestation of Christ’s Dominion”

The Lordship of Christ,  
in the midst of the evil and sorrow of this present world,  
must be discerned by faith,  
with the full assurance of our hope in Him.  
He is coming again for the healing of the nations  
and the perfecting of the Church.  
In that day when he reveals the New Jerusalem,  
his sovereign dominion over the universe  
will be made openly visible to all,  
causing every knee to bow and every tongue to confess  
that JESUS CHRIST IS LORD, to the glory of God the Father.

As the Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter around the world, may the people of Ukraine be able to bury their dead, be able to grieve their loss, be able to find faith in their church, and find hope in knowing that evil will not triumph, and death is not the last word.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**