

When President Vladimir Putin sits at one end of a very long table in order to talk with another human being you know that the man has a problem, but it's a problem common to us all. The presenting issue for Putin, and for all of us, recently, has been fear of Covid-19, but the underlying issue, as every good Freudian will tell you, is always fear of death – and the only way to overcome this fear is closeness. One can see the whole paschal story, the whole paschal mystery, in this light, including the coming to us of God as man, and his willingness to live that life in close proximity to others eventually bringing him to his death on Calvary. If we look at his life we see time and again this dynamic at play: the tension between distance and closeness, for there are times when distance is needed and closeness is to be avoided – both have their benefits and their dangers. The paradigm for this is perhaps the Last Supper when Jesus gathers his closest disciples to him and shares in a most intimate way a meal redolent with the symbolism of self-sacrifice, that is his willingness to be close to others at the danger of bringing about his own death. The contrast between the Beloved Disciple leaning on his breast and Judas being sent out into the dark is significant in this respect, as is also the sharing of bread – not delivered by a Tesco van and already shared out in pre-cut slices but broken and shared from the one loaf of Christ.

Now, where this is going is the terrifying possibility that the war in Ukraine will become one simply of tit for tat where ethnic divides become the arbiter of further slaughter – a reductive scenario in which 'the people' of each nation are reduced to stereotypes. The Ukrainian film director, Sergei Loznitsa, has put his finger on this because of his unwillingness to simply see the issue in terms of nation states, that is of one nationality against another, and his subsequent expulsion from the Ukrainian Film Academy for being a 'cosmopolite' – a Stalinist term, like so many such as traitors or enemies of the people, or, one might add, terrorists or religious fundamentalists, to dismiss him as unworthy of serious consideration. For what he is arguing is that each nation is composed of many minorities whose needs and views also need to be met, to be taken into account – including the many Russian speakers in Ukraine, and the Greeks and Jews and Hungarians also there – as opposed to favouring only those whose prime language is Ukrainian. Now one might think we haven't got a dog in this particular fight and what has it got to do with the story of the Prodigal Son, but what the Father is demonstrating is his act of going out to both sons, his willingness to overcome distance for the sake of love – to be close to others whatever they have done or are doing and the danger that involves. We have the paradigm for that also in our Covid experience where the crisis has brought out the best in so many at the risk of death. Or in the words of Pope Francis, railing especially against the distance that kills especially in the economic world when politicians decide people's futures without ever experiencing what the poor are actually going through

'This is the time to restore our ethics of fraternity and solidarity, regenerating the bonds of trust and belonging. For what saves us is not an idea but an encounter. Only the face of another is capable of awakening the best of ourselves. In serving the people we save ourselves.'
(p107 Let Us Dream)

We could begin perhaps by making sure that everyone is present at the Eucharistic table

'Because solidarity is not the sharing of crumbs from the table but to make space at the table for everyone. The dignity of the people calls for communion.' (p10)

Pope Francis says this with the poor in mind but we are all poor in this respect, that is in our lack of dignity without God. It's God's closeness that is at the root of our dignity.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour