

THE GRAND INQUISITOR
Luke 4:1-13

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on The First Sunday in Lent, March 6, 2022, at the 8:30 a.m. service of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

The devil said to him,

‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’

Jesus answered him,

‘It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone.” ’

Then the devil^{} led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil^{*} said to him,*

‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’

Jesus answered him,

‘It is written,

*“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.” ’*

Then the devil^{} took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him,*

‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

*“He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you”,*

and

*“On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’*

Jesus answered him,

'It is said,

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

A classic of Western Literature is Dostoevsky's "The Grand Inquisitor."¹ Based on the Temptation of Christ, it is an *affirmation* of human freedom, as bestowed and upheld by Christ, and an *admonition* concerning how fragile freedom is. We need *both* affirmation and admonition today.

I.

In the piece, which is a chapter from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Christ returns to earth, to Seville, Spain, not at the *end* of the world, but during the *worst* days of the Inquisition. A hundred heretics had been burned at the stake the day before. As Christ enters the city

He comes softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognizes Him...

The people are irresistibly drawn to Him, they surround Him, they flock about Him, follow Him.

He moves silently in their midst with a gentle smile of infinite compassion...

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The cardinal himself, the Grand Inquisitor, passes by the cathedral.

He is an old man, almost ninety, tall and erect, with a withered face and sunken eyes...

He stops at the sight of the crowd and watches it from a distance.

His face darkens...and his eyes gleam with a sinister fire.

He holds out his finger...The crowd immediately makes way for the guards, and in the midst of deathlike silence they lay hands on Christ and lead him away...

¹I am quoting from two different translations, and paraphrasing some myself in this sermon for clarity. One source is Excerpt from "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, edited by the Hutterian Brethren, copyright © 1988, Plough Farmington House, Farmington, PA, distributed by The Trinity Forum and available at America@TTF.org. The other is from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Chapter 5, by Fyodor Mikailovich Dostoevsky, translated by Constance Garnett.

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Later that night, the Grand Inquisitor interrogates Christ in his prison cell. He peppers Christ with questions, the same questions with which the Devil tempted Christ in the wilderness:

- Why have you *refused* to turn stones into bread? You could create faith with the promise of no more hunger.
- Why have you *refused* to throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple and be rescued by angels? You could create faith through dazzlement, through entertainment, through proof we seem to think eye and ear provide.
- Why have you *refused* my offer of political power and rule over the whole Kingdom? You could create faith through royal decree. No questions asked. No struggle. No dissent. No disobedience.

As the Inquisitor interrogates Christ, he reveals why he thinks the human race is *not* up to the *freedom* Christ offers:

...Nothing is more seductive for humanity than... freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.

... Turn stones into bread, and humanity will run after You like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient, though forever trembling, lest You withdraw Your hand and deny them Your bread.

...freedom and bread enough for all are inconceivable together, for never, never will humanity be able to share their bread with one another!

Throughout this Inquisition, Christ remains silent.

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Then the Inquisitor tells Christ that tomorrow he will be burned at the stake. In response, *Christ approaches him in silence and softly kisses the Inquisitor*. This the only answer Christ gives the Grand Inquisitor.

The old man shudders. His lips move. He goes to the door, opens it, and says to Christ: *Go, and come no more—come not at all, never, never!*

Yet as he lets Christ out into the dark alleys of the town:

*The kiss glows in his heart,
Though he still adheres to his idea
That nothing is a greater cause of suffering than freedom.*

II.

I have written 3,000 words or more this week trying to decide what to say about the Temptation of Christ and “The Grand Inquisitor” in light of the slow crushing of freedom we are witnessing in Ukraine. But no matter how many keystrokes I initiate, no matter how many drafts I print out, mark up, tear up, nothing profound comes.

I am aware that there are many in our congregation who know a lot more about the matter: from a diplomatic standpoint, a military standpoint, an economic standpoint, a security standpoint. But I feel compelled to say something about a standpoint which walks alongside these for people of faith: an understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ and how that Good News might have some resonance in this horror unfolding and visible before the world.

At the opening of “The Grand Inquisitor,” Christ appears as a *loving and gentle presence*, who by his very appearance at Seville arouses *hope and admiration*. “*He moves silently in their midst, with a gentle smile of infinite compassion.*”

At the end of the story, he kisses his cruel interrogator with a kiss. “*Christ approaches him in silence and softly kisses the Inquisitor.*”

In between, Christ is silent.

What does Christ’s *confident* silence mean?

In his silence, Christ demonstrates great trust in the freedom he bestows on humanity, as evidenced by the critique of that freedom the Grand Inquisitor offers. That freedom is even clearer in his Biblical refusal to coerce faith through miracle, magic, or authority.

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I do not believe for one minute that God intends for the Grand Inquisitors to rule the day. I do not believe human beings are incapable of living with freedom at the political or at the individual level. But neither do I believe that living with freedom is easy.

Dostoevsky writes:

*In place of the rigid ancient law,
we must hereafter with free heart
decide what is good and what is evil...*

The one choice we do *not* have is to *avoid* deciding.

Whether we like it or not, we live with “the fearful burden of free choice.” In every sphere of our lives, the choice between good and evil, between less good and less evil, lies in our hands. We do not control the outcomes our choices produce, but we do control the actions we take in light of the options before us.

To lesser and greater degrees, nations in the world, citizens of Ukraine, citizens in our nation and Europe face the same questions:

- Can this invasion be stopped? Curtailed, Reversed?
- What would it take to lead Russia to retreat?
- Would the risk be too high?
- Would the risk of World War III – surely to be nuclear – be so high as to qualify as a greater – though nobly intentioned – evil than what Putin has done?

Nearly every nation near Ukraine is taking action. Europe seems united. But hardly any nation seems willing to take military action – at least yet – to save Ukraine. This is one history may have to judge. There is no “rigid ancient law.” We have to decide “with a free heart” what is good and what is evil, what is less good and less evil, how far to go, how far not to go.

III.

That choice is not easy, but no decision maker has to make it alone.

While in “The Grand Inquisitor,” Christ never speaks, he is a *spiritual and moral presence* at the beginning of the essay and a *spiritual and moral presence* at the end. Silent. Confident. Compassionate. Facing his own death, to be sure, but *present* for all the people, including the Inquisitor he kisses at the end of the story.

While in our current situation Christ does not devise diplomatic or military strategy, his presence in this great and sad instance of human cruelty outlasts even the brutality being inflicted on the people of Ukraine, some of whom seek refuge in other countries, some of whom seek protection in hiding at home, some of whom fight, and all of whom follow the calm courage of their admirable President.

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As is sometimes happens, I was writing this sermon and a member of the congregation sent me a YouTube video of the Prayer of Ukraine, sung by a Ukrainian choir in an American church ten years ago. The person who sent me the video knows much more about Eastern Europe than I do, and I later asked him what he thought the options to be, but his initial impulse was not to send me, as his pastor, an article or policy paper. He sent a prayer. A prayer put to music.

Many of you have heard this prayer:

*Lord, oh the Great and Almighty,
Protect our beloved Ukraine,
Bless her with freedom and light
Of your holy rays.*

*With learning and knowledge enlighten
Us, your children small,
In love pure and everlasting
Let us, oh Lord, grow.*

*We pray, oh Lord Almighty,
Protect our beloved Ukraine,
Grant our people and country
All your kindness and grace.*

*Bless us with freedom, bless us with wisdom,
Guide into a kinder world,
Bless us, oh Lord, with good fortune
For ever and evermore.²*

The words were beautiful. They reflect the aspirations of people in any nation who love their country and seek to live in peace and freedom. But what struck me was the words than the sound of music, sung by voices some of whom may no longer be alive. All over the world, people are united in singing that national song of Ukraine, the national prayer of its people. “Bless her with freedom and light.”

No matter what happens to Ukraine, they and their leaders will have made their choices between less good and less evil, the same choices being made by leaders of other nations supportive of Ukraine. None of us knows the outcome, but few of us are hopeful. But no matter what the outcome, the music will remain forever, just as the silent, figure of Jesus *remains* beyond the cynicism and brutality of the Grand Inquisitor.

Music lives on. Prayer lives on. Christ lives on.

Even as Christ never removes from our free hearts the responsibility of deciding, he approaches us in silence, and softly kisses us.

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKSWmJk-kro&list=RDCKSWmJk-kro&index=1>. The prayer was composed by Oleksandr Konysky in 1885, and the music by Mykola Lysenko.