

## Living honestly

The Russian invasion of Ukraine makes me so angry. From my perspective, it seems so unnecessary. I realise that there are many ethnic Russians who live in certain parts of a neighbouring country, Ukraine. There is a large common history and overlapping culture – so why not unite the countries, some Russians say? That is fine – but why go to war? Surely, nothing is more likely to damage mutual respect and understanding than fighting over what you have in common. Far better to respect! That is more likely to produce a healthy result: to acknowledge the small differences whilst building close and warm-hearted relations based on the big similarities. All that is said, clearly, from my perspective.

Wanting to understand what may be motivating Russian leaders and people today, I read *Russia: myths and realities* by Rodric Braithwaite, British Ambassador to Moscow, 1988 – 1992. Braithwaite, very highly regarded by fellow diplomats, paints a vivid picture of the hopes and ideals that inspire Russian politicians and people. The Rus people, as an ethnically distinct group, arose in Eastern Europe, about 1000 years ago, ironically in the area situated halfway between Kyiv and Moscow. They are borderland people, pulled to look west to Europe and east to Asia. There have been seasons of great Empire, and times when Russia has been invaded or ignored. Braithwaite shows that myths of historic greatness are powerfully motivators for the country. Yet, tragedy strikes when reality does not sufficiently match these myths – such as now. He says:

*Russian reality is coloured by the disconcerting and deeply rooted phenomenon of 'vranyo'. This is akin to the Irish 'blarney', but lacks the overtone of roguish charm. Individuals, officials, governments tell lies if they believe it serves their interests, or those of their bosses, their organisation or the state.*

You will be familiar with this, as subordinates often feel they can only tell their bosses what they want to hear. Yet, when we are enthralled by our own myths, it also happens the other way around. Leaders feed their people myths that are insubstantial distractions. This behaviour is not confined to Russia; we are becoming increasingly familiar with it here. The most obvious example worldwide is the inability of national leaders to take seriously enough the dangers of Climate Change. They may be attending the COP27 summit; they

may issue statements at the end of the conference. But without persistent implementation of behaviour-changing policies, we are being fed myths rather than realities – that ‘business as usual’ is by and large OK.

In the week that leads up to Remembrance Sunday, this challenge is addressed to each one of us, to ourselves as a nation, and to us as part of a family of nations: can we remember our past honestly in such a way that the sacrifice and courage of the past shapes the behaviour that is needed to protect the future? War should only be fought to end war. Sacrifice, freely offered, has to be honoured by making it a platform to transform the future. Jesus offered himself on the cross; that sacrifice is made effective through changed lives. All this requires us to be honest about ourselves – to choose to live more in reality than myth. TS Eliot said “humankind cannot bear too much reality”. Yet that is our calling: to shed false images and self-aggrandising narratives, so that we may more fully follow the One who is our Way, our Truth, our Life.

Rev Canon Robert Cotton

### **Good News Resource**

Testimony is very important. In the early days of the Methodist Church members would go to class meetings every week where they would be encouraged to share their own story - 'where have you seen the work of God in your life this week?' was the question that was asked and answered. Today the Methodist Church has developed The Story Project - folks like you and me standing in front of a camera and telling their story. Have a look - <https://thestoryproject.org.uk/>

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