Sunday 32C

Recently, President Vladimir Putin announced a partial mobilisation of Russia's civilian population for his disastrous war in Ukraine. Since that time, thousands of young men have been drafted into the Russian army and pushed onto the front line.

You'd think Russian mothers would be up in arms. And there is some anger at the way new recruits have been treated: poor equipment, worse training, even having no food, water and warm clothing. But what about the more basic point? What about the fact President Putin is forcing their sons to go and die in a pointless and destructive war – a war he himself started? It's the weirdest thing. It makes them sad – but it doesn't make them angry.

I bring up these mothers because, in our first reading, we see another mother. The reading comes from the second book of Maccabees, one of the latest books of the Bible. It's a kind of morality tale – one that probably would have gone down better in a 2nd century BC Jewish context than it does today. It's a bit gruesome for our tastes. But then again, we haven't lived through what that persecuted Jewish community did.

In the story, a mother is being forced to watch her own son die. Not one or two of them, but seven, one after the other, killed in the cruellest possible way! In terms of imaginable human experiences, it doesn't get much worse than that. Yet the mother is calm, serene even. Far from trying to save her sons, she lets them go – even encouraging her youngest to follow his brothers to death rather than betray his faith.

Theres no doubt that, like those Russian mothers, she loved her sons. Yet despite that, once again like those Russian mothers, she's willing to let them die. What's the difference, then between this Jewish mother and the Russian ones waving their sons off to Ukraine?

I think the difference between them is grounded in the difference between God and Vladimir Putin. Both God and Mr Putin call on people to sacrifice the very thing they hold most precious. But only one of them has the right to do. Only one of them deserves the free gift of everything we are with nothing held back. And it is not Vladimir Putin.

The attitude of these Russian mothers is born of subservience. Because they are not free, because they've never been free, they don't feel outraged by

tyranny, even when it demands the sacrifice of their own children. To these mothers, being outraged at a political tyrant makes not much more sense than being outraged at a hurricane or a snowstorm. Its only when we're free, politically speaking, that the difference becomes obvious. Their acceptance comes from a lack of freedom.

For the mother in our story, it's the opposite. Her acceptance comes from an abundance of freedom. Having freely submitted herself, and everything that is hers, to God – who alone is deserving of that sacrifice, - she can face the worst the world has to offer with calm. That is the peace of the saints. That's the serenity of the martyrs. A peace and serenity grounded in freedom.

We're coming into the month of November, a month when we remember those we have loved and lost. From us, too, God sometimes requires the offering of that which we hold dearest. That's never an easy thing to do; but it becomes easier in light of the very clear difference between God, on one hand, and Mr Putin on the other. God is not a heavenly tyrant, demanding our silent acquiescence as he takes from us what is not his. No, he calls us to offer only what already belongs to him – ourselves and our loved ones – so as to lead us into deeper freedom.

By Fr John Deighan