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# War, and peace: *Alastair McIntosh's* Thought for the Week

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*'What might each one of us be doing now, to turn back future streams of war?'*



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**O**ver recent months, I've been reading Leo Tolstoy's epic novel about Napoleon's invasion of Russia, *War and Peace*. It runs to over thirteen hundred pages. My copy of the paperback was so thick and heavy that I had to borrow my wife's hairdryer to melt the glue that bound it all together, and separate it into four parts. Only then could I render the experience one more of reading, than of weight-lifting!

But as Russia's troops closed in upon Ukraine this week, a different heaviness beset me.

In researching the novel, Tolstoy had read French and Russian histories of the events – more than half a century previous – that provide the background to his book. He interviewed survivors and visited the battlefields. It left him with a powerful sense that war cannot just be blamed on one event, or one person. It's a consequence of what has gone before.

'There are two sides to life for every individual,' he said: 'a personal life, in which [one's] freedom exists in proportion to the abstract nature of [one's] interests, and an elemental life within the swarm of humanity.' This other side of life is built up of perhaps billions of prior events.

I've thought so much of that these past few days. What can you or I do about the shocking invasion of Ukraine?

There used to be a saying: 'What did you do in the war, Daddy?'

Tolstoy's sense of those billions of prior events that feed into the elemental swarm, invites a deeper question: 'What did you do... before the war?'

What might each one of us be doing now, to turn back future streams of war?

I have no clincher of an answer. I just have humming through my head a Sydney Carter hymn I heard at Iona Abbey. Friends may know it. It's about how we treat our neighbours, and the billions of acts of kindness and respect that set the seeds of peace.

When I needed a neighbour  
Were you there, were you there?  
When I needed a neighbour, were you there?  
And the creed and the colour  
And the name won't matter  
Were you there? Were you there? ●

*Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.*

## **The Ten Virgins and Ukraine**

*This is a time for which we have been preparing. When the Quakers received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947 for works of relief and reconciliation, the laudation quoted a Norwegian poet. It said: "The unarmed only / can draw on sources eternal. / The spirit alone gives victory."*



*Now, there is a parable in Matthew's gospel. Ten virgins waited with their lamps at night for the bridegroom, who had been delayed. Five were foolish and had brought no extra oil. Five were wise, and had come equipped with flasks. All fell asleep. And when the bridegroom came at midnight struck, they rose and rushed to rekindle their lamps.*

*Alas, the foolish had run out of oil. They begged a top-up from the wise. But the wise said: "Away, and buy your own." By the time the foolish got back from the market, it was too late. Too late! The wedding banquet doors were shut. Sitting in our Glasgow Quaker Meeting on the day that Putin rattled the nuclear sabre – and just an hour after I'd had a message from a former student to say that he was in Kyiv to fight in the resistance - the parable opened to me. The virgins are the soul, the primal wellspring in us all. The bridegroom is the divine, beyond all male and female. The banquet is the community of heaven. The oil is how we hold things "in the light".*

*It's in our daily lives that we do our spiritual work. No one else can do it for us. We cannot beg, borrow or buy the true stairway to heaven. And spiritual work is demanding. Spiritual seed that grows to reap and press and yield its spiritual oil is not a gift to sow on fallow ground. Even Jesus wearied, and healing people cost him strength. No wonder we too weary! And yet, "keep watch, keep watch", the parable concludes.*

*War in Ukraine: what might it ask of us? Violence in its rigid logic works upon a short temporal wavelength. Nonviolence, works upon the long wave. Have we prepared? How might we apply our Peace Testimony? Are we, this day, preparing oil to keep our lamps alight?*

**Alastair McIntosh, Glasgow**