Fr. Simon writes …

I grew when the world was living through what was known as the Cold War. The northern hemisphere was territorially, militarily and ideologically divided into two great power blocs – the Western bloc dominated by the United States and its allies in NATO, and the Eastern bloc by Russia in the form of what was then known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, later the Soviet Union, and its satellite countries in the Warsaw Pact.

Although there was not a 'hot' war – direct confrontation on battlefields between the power blocs – the Cold War was being conducted through power games, espionage and competing ideologies, creation of zones of influence, often in the developing nations of the world, including in South East Asia and Africa.

Overshadowing this was the threat of the use of nuclear weapons by one side or another, and the possibility of mutually assured destruction, fittingly abbreviated to MAD. I wonder if you remember the terrifying 1984 film *Threads*, which depicted the effects of a nuclear attack on the UK.

I also remember the earlier arrival in the 1980s of American cruise missiles on British soil, deployed as part of a NATO strategy to counter the Soviets' long-range nuclear capabilities. This led to significant public opposition and protests, particularly at RAF Greenham Common and RAF Molesworth.

It was an anxious time.

At the end of the 1980s, I went to Staffordshire Polytechnic (that ages me – if you don't know what a polytechnic was, ask a grandparent), later Staffordshire University, in Stoke-on-Trent to study International Relations for three years. That helped me understand much more about the history and development of international relations, politics and conflict.

Immediately before going to 'poly', I was privileged to visit a colleague from my days in journalism who was working in Berlin, at that time (1987) the iconic city divided between west and east, with West Berlin surrounded by communist East Germany. We visited both sides of the Berlin Wall, still very much intact. It was an exciting and at times chilling visit, being in the midst of an historic city in which the Cold War was being played out in front of our eyes.

Towards the end of my degree studies and just afterwards, it was joyful to see the Berlin Wall come down and see Germany reunited, as Soviet communism collapsed. With the apparent end of the warring blocs, people even started to speak about the 'end of history' as the western ideal seemed to have 'won'.

Why am I telling you this? Well, that sense of anxiety has returned for me, in different circumstances, as different power blocs are returning and global powers are again flexing their muscles against each other.

The former Bishop of Exeter, Robert Atwell, has recently published a book called *Bewilderment: A Spiritual Guide.* Focusing on the book of Jonah from the Hebrew Scriptures, he writes of us living in a new 'Age of Anxiety'. Of rising lawlessness on our streets, the

anxious middle class living in gated communities, a collapse of trust in government and politicians and a change of attitudes towards institutions we relied on such as the police and media organisations. Though we are more protected that earlier generations, and many enjoy a higher standard of living than our forebears, public confidence is still fragile.

Atwell writes: '*Many have yet to recover from the trauma of the Covid pandemic. There is unease about immigration in general and asylum seekers in particular, who are seen as threatening community cohesion. Meanwhile, climate change, the territorial and economic ambitions of the superpowers, the intractable and incendiary conflicts of the Middle East, and the manipulation of trust on social media combine to generate a heady mix of uncertainty and fear*' (pages 2-3).

How do we engage with, and respond to, our times? What, or who, might guide us through this anxious age?

Wrestling with bewilderment is very much the experience of the biblical prophet Jonah, and we can learn much from the short book bearing his name.

So we'll be exploring this as our Lent group this year. Meeting in the hall at St Paul's Church for five Wednesdays, starting on 25th February at 7.30pm each time, we'll discover together what God will teach us through the story of Jonah.

May I encourage you to join in? All are welcome. Let's navigate this anxious time together – with one another and with God.

Fr Simon