

The fox and the chickens

We know that the Pharisees are the bad guys throughout the gospels, don't we? They are described in a stereotypical fashion – they're the ones wearing the metaphorical black hats, they're the villains, they're out to get Jesus, trying to trap him, trying to trick him and trying to incriminate him so that they can get rid of him.

But they're not always the bad guys: In Luke's gospel, we read that Jesus accepted invitations from Pharisees to eat with them in their homes (Luke 7:36, 10:37, 14:1), and in John's Gospel, we have the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee. Nicodemus, of course, stood up for Jesus in the Sanhedrin, and along with Joseph of Arimathea arranged for Jesus' proper burial.

As we read the gospels, we need to remember that not all of the Pharisees were necessarily bad guys, out to do Jesus harm. Others may have been good guys - friends of Jesus like Nicodemus, who sought Jesus out – not to incriminate him, but to listen to him.

The opening of our gospel reading today, from Luke chapter 13, tells us about some pharisees who came to Jesus with a warning. "At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."" (13:31)

At one level, yes, they do warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him, so best not to be in Jerusalem, so maybe these are indeed 'good pharisees'. Or perhaps, at another level, they don't want the disruption that Jesus' presence in Jerusalem would cause, so maybe they were motivated by self-interest. More likely than either of these explanations, though, is that these Pharisees were acting as messengers, bringing Jesus a threat from Herod.

Given how Jesus replies to this 'warning', the latter is the most likely explanation. "Go tell that fox," (or "Go tell [Herod]"). Jesus understands what the Pharisees say as a threat rather than as a warning, and makes it clear he knows who the threat is from.

"Go tell that fox," he says. 'Fox' to the people of Judea, had a similar connotation to what we use today, when we say "sly as a fox", but also, a fox is not a noble animal – not like a lion, or a ram or an eagle. "(Sly as a)

fox” might be a step up from “(cunning as a) rat”, but it’s still an insulting way to refer to a king or tetrarch.

“Go tell that fox,” Jesus says, “I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.” (13:32)

Jesus dismisses the warning, the threat, from the Pharisees and Herod. He’s not going to be stopped – he will keep doing what he’s been doing, and he will complete his mission.

“In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!”

Jerusalem was the goal. Back in Chapter 9 of Luke’s gospel, we read that “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (9:51) or in the older translations “...he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,” (KJV).

There is an inevitability to what Jesus says he is doing: and Herod’s not got going to stop it, and the pharisees are not going to stop it – this is going to happen.

I’m reminded of Jesus’ later response when asked by the Pharisees to rebuke his disciples when they were cheering and waving branches and cloaks during his entry to Jerusalem. “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” (Luke 19:40)

Jesus can’t be stopped, and his mission will be fulfilled. We can see now that the shadow of the cross looms over this conversation – because the fulfilment of his mission will be his death on a cross on a hill just outside Jerusalem. Here, responding to the Pharisees, Jesus says “surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” and it would be in Jerusalem, where just about everyone turned against him, where he was tried, and beaten and condemned.

Jesus is, of course, much more than a prophet, but he is continuing the prophetic tradition. Prophets are those who speak the word of God, and their words were – and are – rejected by those who don’t like what they hear.

Prophets challenge the ways of the world. They speak God's truth, and that threatens the world's structures. People are always looking to those around them to decide what to do and how to live, and God calls us all to continue the prophetic tradition by sharing the good news of Jesus with those around us.

In our translation, and in the original Greek, the word "Jerusalem" occurs three times in a row – first at the end of verse 33, and then twice at the beginning of verse 34. Jerusalem was important.

Of all cities in the world, Jerusalem should have been the one to welcome the awaited Messiah. God had sent prophets to Jerusalem, but the people had rejected those prophets. And now God was sending his own Son, and they would reject him as well.

Jerusalem was the capital, but also the centre of spiritual, religious, social and economic life for the Jewish people of the time. And here Jesus expresses his sorrow for Jerusalem.

Jesus' sorrow was not just sorrow for the city, but it is sorrow for what the city represents. The people. God's chosen people. People to whom God had been faithful through all the years, but who had turned away from God time and time again.

Jesus was lamenting Jerusalem, as he would do again: When he saw the city as he approached on the first Palm Sunday, Luke tells us, "He wept over it" (Luke 19:41).

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

Yes, the people had turned away, over and over again, and, yes, they'd killed the prophets and stoned people sent to them, but even so, Jesus wants to gather them, to protect them, so save them. And it's not just a good idea, something that he'd like to do – Jesus longs to gather them together, and he ponders how often he's longed to do that.

Jesus uses a motherly image: He says that he is like a mother hen gathering her brood of chicks under her wings. It is a wonderful, protective image. And it is in stark contrast to him calling Herod a fox. Foxes and chickens don't mix.

In the Old Testament, we see similar imagery of God as a protective bird used – God is like “an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them” (Deuteronomy 32:11), Isaiah (31:5) says “Like birds hovering overhead, the Lord Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will ‘pass over’ it and will rescue it.”, and the psalmist implores God to “hide me in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 17:8, also 36:7, 57:1, 61:4) and declares “Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 63:7),

The image that Jesus uses here follows that tradition. Hens are willing to spread their wings in protection over their chicks whenever a predator like a fox or a cat comes along. A hen is not a particularly intimidating or dangerous animal – and so, often, when attacked, a hen will end up sacrificing her own life to protect her chicks.

But despite Jesus’ longing to gather up the people, the people were not willing. Think about the opening of John’s gospel where we are reminded that “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” (John 1:10-11)

They were the chosen people, but they chose not to recognise their promised messiah – I feel Jesus’ heartbreak as he laments: “...how often I have longed to gather your children together ... and you were not willing.”

Has the situation changed much today, do you think?

All the people of the world are God’s chosen people. Remember that conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus where he said “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

God offers his love to people today over and over again, but so many people repeatedly reject and turn away from that love. People today continue to reject God love. What do people need God for? They’re doing pretty well. They can look after themselves.

Jesus lamented Jerusalem, but he didn’t turn away.

The people – most of the people, anyway – had rejected him. Yes, there was a cheering crowd when he entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday...

but the crowd's cheering had changed to cries of "Crucify him" by Good Friday.

And again, Jesus didn't turn away.

And then, when he was being crucified, nailed to the cross, hanging in agony and anguish, he didn't turn away either. Instead of rejecting those who rejected him, instead of cursing those who cursed him, instead of saving himself and condemning them, he prayed for them, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

And Jesus won't turn away from us either. And it's not just a vague 'us' as people or the church, but 'us' as individuals. Jesus won't turn away from me. Jesus won't turn away from you.

Think of being a little defenceless chick when the fox manages to find its way into the chicken coup. Ravenous fox, helpless chicken – there can only be one result, right? Only one result, right up until when the mother hen puts herself in between the fox and you.

The final verse of our reading begins with Jesus addressing Jerusalem, "Look, your house is left to you desolate." (13:35a). In 587 BC, God abandoned Jerusalem to destruction by Babylonia. Many of Jerusalem's inhabitants were killed, and the rest were driven into exile. Eventually, a small remnant was allowed to return, and the city was rebuilt.

And then, in the first century AD, having rejected God's ways and God's son, the city was again.

Following his triumphal entry, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem again and declared, "The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." (Luke 19:43-44).

And again, on the way to Calvary, he turned to the women alongside the road and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children". (Luke 23:28)

By the time that Luke compiled his gospel, Jerusalem was in ruins again, in response to a Jewish revolt, the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, and in

AD70, the city was destroyed, and the people killed or enslaved. The house was truly desolated.

But even as Jesus told of the desolation, he shared hope, quoting Psalm 118:26 “I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

While the disciples would shout the same Psalm as Jesus’ later entered the city, the fuller explanation is that it points to the future return of Jesus – when we hold that, as the Nicene Creed says, he will return to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

Jesus won’t turn away from us. In his fulfilled mission which took him to Jerusalem, to Calvary, to the cross, to the tomb, and all the way through death into everlasting life, he opened the way for us to be part of that kingdom.

Jesus won’t turn away from us, but we need to turn to him.

Amen