

The fox and the hen.

This morning's reading from Luke's Gospel follows on nicely from the passage we were thinking about last week. Then we found ourselves with Jesus out in the wilderness right at the start of his ministry, being tempted and tested by the devil, and what we were being shown there in that story was certain things that threatened Jesus and his mission, things that were a danger to him. These were weaknesses in Jesus, places in his life where he could all too easily fall if he was not careful and vigilant.

This week we move to a different kind of threat that Jesus faced, a different danger. Now it is not personal matters that might derail and destroy Jesus, but political matters – the political powers and forces that were arrayed against Jesus. So we are told that some Pharisees, some of these devout religious figures who often opposed Jesus, came to him and said, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you!' Now the enemy that is threatening Jesus here is not temptation but Herod, the puppet king that the occupying Romans had set up over the Jewish people. This was the son of the King Herod who had been around when Jesus was born and who heard of the arrival of a rival king and who had tried to kill Jesus by massacring all the children where Jesus had been born. That Herod had viewed Jesus as a threat and – well, like father like son. This Herod is equally determined to eliminate him.

Now, we need to note very carefully Jesus' response to these Pharisees. What is his reaction to being warned that his life is in danger? One of the points that I have highlighted in recent weeks is the importance of Jesus' baptism when God declared that he was the beloved one in whom God delights. Jesus needs to know this. He needs this reassurance as he faces all the hostility and opposition that he faces in his ministry. In the storm that will break over Jesus the one thing that will hold him secure and steel him and nerve him is the knowledge that he is loved and prized by God. Love, after all, casts out fear, and being embraced is what holds us together when we risk falling apart. And here, in Jesus' response to the Pharisees, we see a beautiful example of Jesus' inner strength and resolve. Just listen to his defiant reply: 'Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.' Then he goes on to speak of

how he must go to Jerusalem for a prophet cannot be killed away from Jerusalem – and what a revealing comment that is. It shows for a start that Jesus knows what Jerusalem is like and the risk he faces in going there: Jerusalem, the capital city, the dwelling place – supposedly - of the Most High is also the seat of opposition to God and to God’s prophets. Jerusalem, so-called holy city of peace, is part of the religious and political establishment that includes Herod and that resists the living God. Jesus knows he is walking into a death trap! Yet he is so calm and poised and centred, refusing to be deflected from his mission: ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures...’ Don’t distract me with death threats! Now, there is resilience and determination for you.

I wonder how many of you are following the daily devotional material on our website during this season of Lent. I was thinking about this passage and Jesus’ response to the Pharisees when I was reading Thursday’s meditation and it seems to fit so perfectly, so I’ve printed on the cover of our service sheets. It’s a poem by someone called Dawna Markova and it goes:

I will not die an unlived life,
 I will not live in fear
 of falling or catching fire.
 I choose to inhabit my days,
 to allow my living to open me,
 to make me less afraid,
 more accessible,
 to loosen my heart
 until it becomes a wing,
 a torch, a promise...

Here is someone resolved not to be threatened, determined not to be diverted from the path that leads to life by threat of death. Here is someone like Jesus, refusing to be distracted by fear. And then – what a coincidence - after resolving to remain open and accessible this poet chooses to open her heart ‘until it becomes a wing...’

Mention of ‘wing’ leads us of course to what Jesus says next, with its startling imagery. Jesus addresses Jerusalem. He addresses this enemy. He addresses this nest of vipers that is waiting to destroy him. And what does he say? Well, what would you say? Would you curse Jerusalem? Would you spit threats at it? Would you scold and warn it? Well, here is what Jesus says: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are

sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing...’ And what a world there is in that image of the hen sheltering her brood. What a vision! That imagery of the brooding hen has a background to it, for it’s a variation on an image of God found elsewhere in the Bible. We could go right back to the beginning and to creation where we are presented with the Spirit of God brooding over the waters of chaos out of which God creates the cosmos. Here is God hovering over creation. And the same word is found again in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy where we find God pictured as a bird hovering over its young, only here God is an eagle:

As an eagle stirs up its nest,
and hovers over its young,
as it spreads its wings, takes them up
and bears them aloft on its pinions...

And that’s such a beautiful image, but an eagle is a powerful bird and here it is lifting its chicks up out of danger, transporting them away. But Jesus is no eagle. And nor is he a lion or a bear or a leopard which are other images of God found in the Old Testament and which Jesus might have chosen. After all, Herod is pictured as a fox! And foxes are wily and cunning, fast and fierce. But to Herod the fox, Jesus is a hen with only her wings to protect her chicks. And as one commentator has said, ‘in their encounters with foxes throughout history chickens have not tended to fare well’.

The American preacher Barbara Brown Taylor has a wonderful sermon on this passage and I can’t do better than quote her here: She says, ‘the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks.’ And she goes on, ‘Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.’ The tragedy, of course, is that Jerusalem refused shelter under those vulnerable wings. The chicks rejected the shelter of this one who came in the name of the Lord and Jerusalem was destined then to succumb to another fox, the fox of mighty Rome who later devoured it. In the words of our poem, Jerusalem was destined to fall and to catch fire.

In our midweek fellowship this week, thinking about prayer, we were reflecting on the different images of God that we have in our minds. How do we envisage the God to whom we pray? Mostly we think of God in images of strength for we view God as all-powerful. And the Bible furnishes our minds with strong images of protection - God is our rock, God is our fortress, God is our strength, God is our shield. And then of course many of our images of God are also male: God as Father, God as bridegroom. And note this well, that the image of God that we entertain in our minds and hearts profoundly influences our relationship with God. And our image of God not only affects our relationship with God, it also affects the kind of world that we live in. That is the terrifying danger of idolatry, for we don't just create God in our own image we also create the world in our image of God. And a world presided over by a God who is only father, or eagle, or rock will always be a particular kind of world, a world where strength and power rule. This is the world where the fox can too easily be king - the cunning and wily and strong fox – and that is surely a world where it is easier for violence and conflict to seed and to spread. And just when we've got used to such a world, just when we have given a million reasons why it has to be like this and why it can't be otherwise, God's word comes along and gives us this extraordinary alternative image with which to furnish our imagination, of a mother hen, enfolding her often reluctant and wayward chicks under her wings; a mother hen, vulnerable and willing to die for her chicks, even when they turn against her as Jerusalem would, even when they would rather see her dead. Well, behold your God!

One last image for us. Our reading from Genesis 15 this morning pictures Abram encountering God. God appears to Abram, father of the Jewish race, and says to him, 'Abram, I am your shield' - that familiar, strong image of protection. And then God tells Abram to look up and to count the stars, so numerous will his descendants be. So there stands Abram, beneath the stars, covered only by the dark night sky and vast empty space. Now, remove for a moment the voice of God which addresses Abram, and remove the promise of countless children and this could be an image of modern humanity, at least in this part of the world. Here we stand, 'above us only sky' as John Lennon once put it, alone in a universe emptied of God and drained of divine presence. Now, in your mind's eye replace that blank void with the Spirit of God hovering over the world. Imagine the Spirit brooding as this mother hen, yearning to enfold her quarrelsome, rebellious and spiteful chicks beneath her wings - and imagine

what a different world emerges. This morning, in being baptised, one chick took his place there, and those who joined the church affirmed their place beneath those wings. What might it mean this morning for you to take your place there? Given whatever is going on in your life this morning, what might it mean for you to envision God this way and to place yourself there? Might it, in the words of Dawna Markova's poem, enable you not 'to live in fear of falling or of catching fire...'? Might it, in her words, allow your living to open you, to make you less afraid, more accessible, to loosen your heart? And what might it mean for our conflicted world, where the fox runs rampant? Amen.

Holy and Gracious God,
we lift up our hearts and our voices to praise you,
eternal and sovereign Lord,
all powerful, eternal, almighty,
infinite and majesty and dominion.
You are our rock, or fortress, our strength.
And yet we praise you too vulnerable God,
come amongst us in the fragile flesh of Jesus of Nazareth,
renouncing glory and power,
coming to us as a servant,
coming to us like a mother hen,
spreading your wings over us to protect us.
O God forgive us that we resist your love;
forgive us that we are unwilling
to be gathered under you wings;
forgive us that we turn from you
and become a scattered people
in conflict with one another.
O Lord, have mercy upon us we pray
and forgive us for our sins.

Gather us together once more under your wings
of mercy and forgiveness,
and give us grace to live our lives courageously and well.
We pray these things on Jesus' name and
In his word we pray together, saying...

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God protect your world,
God deliver your people...
O loving God,
come we pray and spread your wings
over your weary world.
Protect us we pray from the things that would
devour and destroy us:
from the evils of war and conflict
and our inhumanity towards one another.
God protect your world,
God deliver your people...
Spread your wings we pray over
refugees and refugee camps
and over asylum seekers,
and over the homeless and the destitute,
that they may find rest and a place
they can call home.
God protect your world,
God deliver your people...
Spread your wings, we pray over

Hospitals and care homes,
over clinics and hospices,
over psychiatric wards and doctor's surgeries,
that the sick and the dying might be cared for,
and may your love may reach out
through human love and compassion.

God protect your world,

God deliver your people...

Spread your wings, we pray over
prisons and young offenders institutions,
and over children who are abused and violated,
and over women's refuges;

We pray that our society will be one
that protects the vulnerable and the disadvantaged.

God protect your world,

God deliver your people...

And spread your wings, we pray over your church,
and from it bring new life.

May it be a place where people find refuge
from all that would harm and destroy human life,
and where they receive strength to live
joyful and courageous lives.

God protect your world,

God deliver your people...