

CHALLENGING THE FOXES

Genesis 15. 1-12, 17-18

Philippians 3. 17 – 4. 1

Luke 13. 31-35

I speak to you in the name of ☩ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I wonder if you have heard the story of a strong young man at a construction site who bragged that he could outdo anyone in a feat of strength. In his repeated bragging, he made a point of criticising and making fun of one of the older workmen. After several minutes, the older worker had had enough. ‘Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?’ the older man said. ‘I will bet a week's wages that I can haul something in a wheelbarrow over to that building that you won't be able to wheel back.’

‘You're on, old man’, the young guy replied.

The older worker reached out and grabbed a wheelbarrow by the handles. Then he turned to the young man and said, ‘All right. Get in.’

In the gospel text that we studied last week, we saw how the devil attacked our Lord in one of his weakest moments. The gospel text for today, however, shows us that the devil also tried to take advantage of Jesus's moments of *strength*. We might find that a bit odd. Why would the devil try to take advantage of moments of strength?

Let us look closely at Luke 13. We see that it shows Christ in a position of power: he is spending his time casting out demons and performing cures, signs that reveal him to be the Messiah and the Son of God. His many followers are witnessing these signs and marvelling at them. And then a group of Pharisees enter the scene.

Now, a word of caution is necessary. Most Christians, when they read the gospels, tend to judge the Pharisees and to put them in a negative light. But notice what they say to our Lord in this passage: ‘Get away from here’, the Pharisees warn, ‘for Herod wants to kill you.’

Do these words sound as if they come from a group of people who are actively opposed to Jesus? We might read and understand that warning in different ways, and in so doing come to very different conclusions.

For example, is the warning one of genuine concern for Christ’s safety? We know that there were several Pharisees who were actually secret disciples of our Lord. Joseph of Arimathea was one of them; ultimately, he went to Pilate and requested Jesus’s body so that he could bury it in his family’s tomb. Another Pharisee, Nicodemus, sat with Christ and discussed the need to be ‘born again’. And in the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke tells us that Pharisees were some of the earliest believers and followers of our Lord (St Paul being one of them). So it is possible that some Pharisees wanted Jesus to be cautious and to get away from any territory where Herod might be able to go after him.

Yet on the other hand, the Pharisees might also have been trying to encourage Christ to leave town and go elsewhere to some other territory, where they might have had greater control over him. It might have been an effort on their part to distract him from his stated goal of going to Jerusalem.

Whatever the reasons for the Pharisees’ warning were, we do not need to focus on them here. There is something much more subtle going on. You see, our Lord knew how Herod operated, and he knew how Herod’s family operated. It was Herod’s father (also called Herod) who, in an effort to kill Jesus as a baby, had all the male babies of Bethlehem massacred. And it was Herod, the Herod about whom the

Pharisees were giving a warning, who had given in to marital pressure by having John the Baptist killed. Christ knew that Herod was a ruthless, bloody tyrant. He was so ruthless that he ordered the murder of two of his sons. Herod definitely had no qualms about eliminating those whom he viewed as a threat to his power.

So the Pharisees come to warn our Lord that Herod was out to get him. And how does Jesus respond? ‘He (says) to them, 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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.”’

These aren’t the words of someone who is intimidated by Herod’s power. These are the words of someone who *understands his own power*. They are also the words of someone who knows he is on a mission and refuses to be distracted or dissuaded from that mission.

However, this interaction between Christ and the Pharisees (and indirectly between our Lord and Herod) is one of subtle temptation that is coming at a moment of great power for Jesus. Christ is not in a weakened condition. He is approaching a high point in his ministry. He has thousands of followers; and it is possible that Herod views him as a legitimate threat.

And there lies the source of the devil’s temptation of our Lord. The tempter approaches Jesus at a moment of strength and power; at a moment of great dedication; and he does this not directly, but through the voices of the Pharisees.

But Christ was not about to be dissuaded from his path; and he knew what following his path meant. Earlier in Luke’s gospel, we are told that our Lord had ‘set his face towards Jerusalem’ (9. 51, 53); and we will follow that path with him throughout this

Lenten season. Jesus is single-minded. He is going to Jerusalem. He is going there to die; and he is going there to die for our salvation. *That* is the reason for the subtle temptation.

‘Get out of here’, they say, ‘for Herod wants to kill you!’ Now, the hearts of the Pharisees might have been in the right place, but their minds were being controlled by the tempter. The last thing that the devil wanted was for Christ to continue on the path on which he had been set by God. The devil failed to pull our Lord away in his moment of weakness, so now the devil comes after him in his moment of strength and tries a different strategy. ‘You’re doing so much good! You’re successful! You have all these people following you! But watch out; you’re not safe. If Herod succeeds in killing you, all this will end!’

The devil sows the seeds of doubt; and he uses the same strategy with us. You and I have been, and surely will be, tested with doubts. We have experienced various temptations; and we will continue to do so every single day of our lives.

But the good news is that we are not in this alone. Our God knows how difficult it is to resist the power of the tempter. Jesus experienced the power of the devil; and he defeated the power of the devil. He set his face towards Jerusalem and never strayed from that path. In our temptations, our God walks with us every step of the way. He will give us his strength so that we can resist, both in moments of weakness and in moments of strength.

Dear friends, during this Lenten season, let us be determined. Let us set our faces toward Easter and stay the course. Christ walks with us. Amen.