

THE STORY OF THE FOX AND THE HEN

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.

As we heard the verses of our gospel text read just a moment ago, we might have been very surprised. At the very beginning of the text, in verse 31, we read that ‘At that very hour, some Pharisees came and said to (Jesus), “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you”.’ Have the Pharisees, who previously have opposed our Lord, had a sudden change of heart? Have they suddenly decided to become nice people?

Other passages in St Luke’s gospel provide us with the answer. In an earlier chapter, Luke writes that the Pharisees ‘rejected God’s purpose for themselves’ (7. 30). In Luke 11, they are described as men who were ‘very hostile’ to Christ, and who decided to ‘lie in wait for him, so to catch him in something he might say’ (11. 53). And in the chapter that just precedes our gospel reading Jesus states very bluntly, ‘Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy’ (12. 1). St Luke has consistently identified the Pharisees as opponents of the prophets, and of our Lord in particular.

When the Pharisees say to Christ, ‘Get away from here’, he is already heading away from Galilee (that is, Herod’s fiefdom) towards Jerusalem. Their words might be interpreted in several ways. Are the Pharisees saying, ‘Go even faster’? Or are they saying, ‘Escape this particular village’? Most likely, they are seeking to deter Jesus from fulfilling his destiny to go to Jerusalem. It is as if they are saying, ‘Lay low; stop this noise; and you will be safe.’

When the Pharisees say, ‘Herod wants to kill you’, they are right, of course. Herod was well-known for his practice of eliminating prophets. He had imprisoned John the Baptist (3. 19) and had had him beheaded (9. 9).

Rather than flee, our Lord sends the Pharisees off with a message. ‘Go tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will 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 outside Jerusalem.”’ Herod, ‘the fox’, is sly, crafty and voraciously destructive; but he will not hinder Christ from completing his work. Jesus casts out demons and heals the sick; he performs public acts that demonstrate the power of the kingdom of God. Our Lord will continue on to Jerusalem, which may indeed involve a three-day journey; but in speaking of the three days needed to complete his work, Christ is also of course referring to his forthcoming crucifixion and resurrection.¹

Yes, Jesus *must* be on his way. Ironically, he does not travel to Jerusalem in order to escape death, but rather in order to die there. Both our Lord’s journey to Jerusalem and his death there will be controlled by his faithfulness to God’s redemptive purposes, and not the wiles of Herod.

Christ journeys to Jerusalem as a prophet, obedient to his destiny and to God’s direction. His pronouncement that it is not right that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem foreshadows St Stephen’s speech before the Council in Acts 7 and his death as the first Christian martyr. You will remember that at the end of his defence, Stephen asks, ‘Which of the prophets² did your ancestors not prosecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become *his* betrayers and murderers’ (7. 52).

¹ Cf. Lk 9. 22.

² Among the prophets killed in Jerusalem were Uriah (Jer 26. 20-23), Zechariah (2 Chr 24. 20-22) and those killed by Manasseh (2 Kgs 21. 16; 24. 4).

So we see that in Luke 13, the stage is set not only for the death of Jesus, but for the stoning of Stephen as well. And our Lord laments:³ ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones⁴ those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ Christ uses the image of a hen, offering care and security to her brood, to describe his own offer of love and protection to Israel, God’s people. But they would not receive him.⁵

The result is that Israel’s ‘house’ is forsaken. The word ‘house’ could be interpreted as a reference to the Temple in Jerusalem, but it is more likely a metaphor for Israel itself. Jerusalem will one day be destroyed; and by the time St Luke penned Jesus’ words, they had already been fulfilled.

The end of this discourse is filled with irony. Our Lord declares that they will not see him again until the time when they will declare, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord’. These words are part of the processional psalm that was sung by pilgrims entering Jerusalem.⁶ Christ looks ahead, not only to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday when he will be praised by his followers, but also to his coming as Son of Man at the end time,⁷ when all of Jerusalem will truly hail him as ‘the one who comes in the name of Lord’.

As we have seen, this gospel passage is indeed filled with fateful words. They clarify the future fate both of Christ and of Jerusalem. Jesus will not be killed by Herod; he will go on to Jerusalem and be killed there as the prophets have been killed. Jerusalem, on the other hand, will reject our Lord and kill him. Its house will be abandoned.

³ Cf. also Mt 23. 37-39.

⁴ Stoning is prescribed by the Torah as punishment for several crimes and is specifically identified as the penalty for blasphemy in Jn 10. 31-33.

⁵ Cf. Jn 1. 11-12).

⁶ Cf. Ps 188. 26.

⁷ Cf. Acts 3. 19-21.

The animal images in this gospel account symbolise the alternatives.

On the one side lurks the fox. The Scriptures consistently depict evil as dangerous and predatory, reinforcing this truth with powerful images. Satan is described as a serpent (Gen 3. 1). The devil is said to prowl around like a lion, looking for someone to devour (1 Pet 5. 8). We are told that the wolf snatches God's sheep (Mt 7. 15; Jn 10. 12); and evil is like a plague of locusts or scorpions from a bottomless pit (Rev 9. 1-11). Herod is depicted as a devouring fox. He is a representative of the powerful who oppress God's people and seek to thwart our Saviour in his prophetic destiny.

The danger presented by evil to the community of God's people is real. The good news is that our God is not only a redeeming God, but a protecting and nurturing God as well. To illustrate this facet of God's nature, the Scriptures use mothering images. Our Lord, God's emissary, likens his desire for Jerusalem to that of a mother hen who instinctively draws her young under her wing when danger threatens. What more tender image could describe God's steadfast love for us, we who are the apple of his eye (Ps 17. 8)?

We who live in the world today may be said to live in a menagerie. Evil threatens us, in the form of a fox. The best thing that we can do is to accept the shelter and protection that the hen (our God) offers us. Elsewhere in the Bible, we are reminded that our faithful God is like an eagle who 'stirs up its nest, (and) hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, (it) takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions'.⁸ Today, we need not be afraid. Whatever evil we may face, let us allow ourselves to be covered by the wings of our loving Father, and to find our refuge in him.⁹

Amen.

⁸ Cf. Deut 32. 11.

⁹ Cf. Ps 91. 4.