

Sermon for Sunday 16th March 2025, Year C, 2nd Sunday of Lent

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-end

Sermon

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you”.

This Herod is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who had tried to kill Jesus as a child after the Three Wise Men told him that a great Jewish leader had been born in Bethlehem. Like father, like son, apparently.

After Herod the Great died, his kingdom was split between his three sons and his sister, and Herod Antipas inherited the area of Galilee and Perea in the north of Israel. He was, however, a puppet of Rome who ruled only at the pleasure of the Roman emperor, and many Jews saw him as little more than a collaborator with the occupiers. He was also the man who had John the Baptist executed.

Jesus, unsurprisingly, had no use for Herod Antipas. If you read the gospels, you'll also discover no mention whatsoever of the two biggest cities in Galilee – Sepphoris and Tiberias. Sepphoris was Herod's first capital, and he built Tiberias to replace it on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Both were homages to Roman culture and represented the opposite of the message that Jesus wanted to proclaim. As far as we know, Jesus never went to either place, even though traditionally his mother Mary was thought to have come from Sepphoris.

In contrast to the comfortable aristocratic life of Herod's court and the Temple leaders in Jerusalem, Jesus saw his role as a prophet in the style of Old Testament Isaiah and Jeremiah, speaking truth to power and criticising selfish and cruel

leaders while proclaiming a vision of a just and righteous kingdom of peace, where swords would be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.

He's not naïve though. Jesus knows that what he is doing and saying is a direct provocation and threat to the power of an empire and its local puppet leaders, not because he is raising an army to challenge them – although this is what they feared – but because he is converting large numbers of people away from an obsession with individual wealth and status, and towards a community of mutual support and equality. This is not good for business, and not good for the hierarchy or the elites.

Jesus' response to the warning is not easy to make sense of, but essentially he is telling Herod (and the Pharisees that brought the warning) that nothing will prevent his ministry and his journey to Jerusalem, and then to the Cross, where his divine calling is leading him.

Jesus calls Herod a 'fox' - that is, a sly and cunning predator without a conscience, but that is as far as his anger goes. He doesn't respond with a revolutionary call to arms against Herod or against the Temple religious leaders who have so often killed the prophets, but instead he turns to a loving lament: "How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Just as Herod is the fox, God is the mother hen. If we're in any doubt, the second verse of the book of Genesis refers in Hebrew to God 'brooding' over the waters, in the same way a hen might brood over her young.

And so, Jesus' message to those seeking his death is one of pity and concern, not rage and revolution. They are death-dealers, but they are also lost souls in a storm of their own making, little chicks fighting each other for scraps rather than taking shelter together under the mother hen's wings. Jesus tells them bluntly, "See, your house is left to you", by which he means, 'you will reap what you sow

– the ruins of your own self-destruction’. Political animals will always fight among themselves for a little bit more power here, a little bit more status there, but there is also a loving creator God, whose motivations and goals are entirely different, and irresistible. The foxes are not in charge as much as they like to think.

Michael Curry, the American Episcopal bishop who you may remember preached a famously joyful sermon at the wedding of Harry and Meghan, wrote that “For Jesus, God’s passionate dream, compassionate desire, and bold determination is to gather God’s human children closer and closer in God’s embrace and love. That mission is at the centre of Jesus’ work. Like a mother hen, God seeks to draw, embrace, include, and welcome God’s children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of Eden itself”.

And if we read through Luke’s gospel it is hard to understate just how strongly Jesus rejects conventional worldly power, status, and authority, and speaks instead of the importance to God of those who are on the fringes of the social order. In Luke’s gospel, we hear the story of the prodigal son who wasted his inheritance on fast living but was welcomed home by a father whose compassion was extravagant. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to people who thought that the only good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan.

Paul’s message in his letter to the Philippians is very similar, which I’m sure is why they are read together on the same Sunday. Paul condemns those who live for their own self-centred interests at the expense of those around them. He calls them the enemy of the cross. With tears, he adds, “Their end is destruction, their glory is in their shame, their minds are set on earthly things”. But these are not the words of fear and hate. These are the words of pity and compassion. Paul cries out to us, the children of his churches, to reject the way of selfishness, of cruelty and political reprisals, and imitate instead those among us who are kind, generous, community-minded, faithful, compassionate, and forgiving.

Paul and Jesus were living in a time of Roman occupation and persecution, and you can hear the echoes of their traumatic experience in everything they say and do. Personally, though, and perhaps it is the same for many of you, I struggle to read these passages today without Putin's horrific war in Ukraine and the endless sufferings of the peoples of the Middle East looming over everything. More and more we see leaders so obsessed with power, glory and vengeance that they will remorselessly destroy everything and everyone to gain more. Anyone who offers a different narrative – more peaceful, more community-minded, more empathic – is a threat to be eliminated, liquidated, eradicated. Paul calls such evil the enemy of the cross, and reminds Christians that our citizenship is in heaven, calling us to stand firm in the Lord, to persist in doing good, to welcome the refugee, to love our neighbour.

Both Jesus and Paul were eventually captured and executed because of their persistence in doing good and their refusal to be cowed or silenced by evil men. Their challenge goes out to us across the centuries. Follow us. Imitate us. Be like us. Do not be afraid, for nothing can defeat love – not even death. For Resurrection is coming.