

13 March 2022

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

*The fox went out on a chilly night,
he prayed to the Moon to give him light,
for he'd many a mile to go that night
before he reached the town-o, town-o, town-o,
he had many a mile to go that night
before he reached the town-o.*

*He ran till he came to a great big pen
where the ducks and the geese were put therein.
"A couple of you are gonna grease my chin
before I leave this town-o, town-o, town-o,
a couple of you are gonna grease my chin
before I leave this town-o."*

When I was a child, long trips in the car usually meant that at some point there would be a family singalong. One of our favourites was "The Fox". We sang it with great delight – fully engaged in the fox's enjoyment, mouths almost watering at the thought of eating our fill of poultry. Despite being farm children, and despite our grandmother keeping hens which were occasionally attacked by stoats, we didn't see the fox's predation from the perspective of the slaughtered poultry or the impoverished farmer and his wife. And anyway, the only fox we were familiar with was the cheeky and likeable Basil Brush.

The only farmyard fire I ever experienced was the result of one of my brothers playing with matches among a big pile of wood-shavings, kept dry at the back of the implement shed for use in covering the floors of Dad's stables. The only things at risk in the fire that day were the implement shed itself and the tractors and other bits of farm equipment stored within it: no animals were ever in danger.

Jesus uses a farmyard picture which would have been familiar to his hearers, and it is one in which there is real risk and danger. The fox was a predator, and chickens and other animals were at risk. Fire was another danger, and when fire came a mother hen who found herself unable to escape in time would gather her brood under her wings so that the chicks would survive even if she didn't: after farmyard fires, those cleaning up have sometimes found a dead hen, scorched and blackened, with live chicks sheltering under her wings.¹

Jesus has been travelling through towns and villages, teaching as he makes his way to Jerusalem. Some Pharisees come to warn Jesus off. It is unlikely that they do so out of concern for Jesus' safety: more likely they simply want him to stay away from where he can have the greatest influence and create the greatest discomfort to them and their causes.

Jesus calls Herod a "fox". Herod is a danger to the people he supposedly rules. He can't be trusted; it is only his own interests he is ultimately concerned with. Calling Herod a "fox" is an expression of contempt. Everyone knew that Herod's only claim to royalty was because the Romans had promoted him from nowhere to keep order at the far end of their territories. Jesus is in effect saying, Herod is neither a great man nor an honest man, he has neither majesty nor honour, he is worthless. In the face of this threat from this nobody, Jesus is determined to continue his ministry – he will continue to drive out demons and heal people.

Jesus says that on the third day he will reach his goal. There is an implication of Jesus completing his ministry soon, but of course we hear "three days" in the light of the Resurrection. The Crucifixion and Resurrection lie ahead of Jesus, and it is in these strange events that his destiny will be fulfilled, his goal will be attained.

Jesus must keep going, he says; the divine plan takes him to Jerusalem. And then he adds, with irony, "for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem". Jesus knows he is going to his death, and that this is part of God's plan. Jerusalem embodies the

¹¹ Wright, *Luke*, p.171

traditions, attitudes, leadership and institutions of Israel, and any who challenge these things, as prophets are wont to do, are likely to meet with a violent end.²

Jesus' mention of Jerusalem brings forth his lament "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I have longed to gather your children together...". Despite knowing that Jerusalem will be the place at which he will be killed, Jesus has a real heart for the place. He is deeply concerned about the fate of the city, established by King David as the city in which God would dwell in his temple. As capital city, Jerusalem represents the whole nation of Israel, the whole of the people.

But this city has over-reached itself, rejecting and killing the prophets sent as messengers from the very God the city supposedly honours. It is as if the city that was once blessed by gifts from God, and which had once been receptive to all that God offered, now arrogantly sees itself as "God's gift".

Jerusalem had a long history of rebelling against God, refusing the way of peace. Rebellion meant that the holy presence of God had abandoned the Temple and the city, opening the way for devastating enemy attack. The only way for the city and the Temple to avoid the destruction which now threatened it was to welcome Jesus as God's envoy of peace. All the signs however were that they would not.³

God loves Jerusalem, loves his people; and this love is steadfast, continuing in spite of it not being reciprocated by the people. It is a tender, caring, love – with that wonderfully striking imagery of a mother hen gathering up her chicks into safety and warmth under her wings. It is not God who is the unwilling partner in this relationship; it is the people. God is not unwilling, far from it: Jesus is willing to go to his *death* to protect God's people – the scorched, blackened chicken; dead, but harbouring life under its wings.

You see, God is a faithful covenant partner. God always delivers.

² Garland, *Luke*, p.560

³ Wright, *Luke*, p.173

In Genesis 15 we read of God making the covenant with Abram – God will give Abram and Sarai descendants in abundance, and they will be given the land that came to be called the “promised land”.

Covenanting is serious business. In Genesis 15 there is cost – the physical labour, the sacrifice of animals, the investment of blood and sweat. The significance of the slaughtered animals, sliced in two, and fire passing between the halves, is that it was a ritual way of saying “let this be the consequence for me if I am found to be unfaithful.”

But notice who it is that is symbolically enacting this covenant: it is *God* who is taking on the promise; it is God who is saying he will bear the consequences of covenant breaking.⁴

And the amazing thing is that in the end that is exactly the kind of thing that happens: although it is humankind, the descendants of Abraham, who break faith, it is *God* in the person of Jesus Christ who bears the deathly consequences for the covenant breaking.

It is that same faithfulness that we see in God’s constant love for his people, despite their unfaithfulness. “How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”. Those two words, “How often”, are very telling. God is constantly trying to woo us back into his loving arms.

It is that same faithful love that sees Jesus go to Jerusalem, to death on the cross, in order to bring us back into that covenant relationship. It is through Christ that we have, as Paul says to the Philippians, attained our “citizenship in heaven”. Philippi was a city in Macedonia which had become a Roman colony with a large population of retired military veterans. Fifty years before Paul’s letter, the Mediterranean world had hailed Caesar Augustus as “saviour” and “lord”. By Paul’s day, Caesar was openly worshipped in those parts. “Citizenship” for these Romans in Philippi of course meant their *Roman* citizenship, with all the rights, security, and privileges that

⁴ Reed; Williams *Lectionary*, pp.46-47

entailed. They knew that if enemies threatened, their current saviour-lord would come from the mother city to rescue them.

But Paul writes that for the Christian – even there in Philippi – there is only one Saviour and Lord, only one mother city from which their citizenship derived, only one hope. The Philippians must be ready to abandon the imitation in order to embrace the reality. And because Christ is no imitation, because Christ is the real-deal, Paul encourages them to find their identity and security in this true Lord and in nobody else. They are to stand firm in holy boldness.⁵

Herod is merely a fox, an impostor. Caesar offers merely a transitory earthly rule focussed on satisfying the wants of the powerful elite, but his destiny is destruction. Over against these two, and others like them even today, it is Jesus who is enthroned as Jerusalem's and Israel's true king, and exalted Lord of all the world.

Paradoxically however, his enthronement comes by way of the cross.

In different ways today's readings are all invitations and pleadings to move more deeply into faithful discipleship in Jesus. We are to "stand firm".

Our appropriate response to our faithful God is faithfulness in return – as Paul says, we are to "stand firm in the Lord". We are to stand firm as we await the return of Christ, at which time God's plan will be made complete and final. In the meantime we are not to be distracted or put off by earthly concerns.

This is not to suggest that how we live now doesn't matter. It does matter. Paul focuses on the transformation of our bodies because everything we do in our lives, we do in our bodies.⁶ And Paul's picture of our future hope is for an embodied existence in the renewed earth when it is joined with heaven. What we do now somehow has continuity into that future and therefore matters.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Twelve*, pp.42-43

⁶⁶ Crouch

The passage in Luke emphasises God's plan. Jesus is not going to be turned away from fulfilling God's plan by minor distractions like threats from Herod. Even Herod, the king, counts as nothing alongside God. Jesus is determined to fulfil God's purposes – "I will reach my goal; I must keep going".

As citizens of heaven with Jesus, we too are part of the fulfilment of God's plan. First, we are the *product* of that plan, accepted by God as a result of Christ living, dying, and rising for us. And, second, we are *instruments* in advancing that plan further, witnesses to the mercy and grace of God in our own lives and bearers of his loving, healing, and forgiving to others.

Foxes are at the henhouse in our own day, just as they were in Jesus' day. Fire is looming. We are to tuck ourselves under the hen's wings, staying under the protection of Jesus.

But this isn't a call to inaction and mere self-preservation. Because we are called too to imitate Jesus. We are called to stand firm in the face of all that tries to frighten us or induce us away from him; we are called to stand firm, to live sacrificially in the way of Jesus and to live faithfully for God.

Amen.

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