

Lent II: Luke 13:31-end, Chester Cathedral 17 March 2019

'Jerusalem, Jerusalem ...how often have I desired to gather your children together?'

Friday morning was sombre in Leicester as we awoke to the news of the shootings in New Zealand. In a new step the gunmen filmed the violence of his hands from a body camera like our police now wear. In Leicester statements of re-assurance for the Muslim community and presence at Mosques were swiftly needed to quell what fear can do.

This St Patrick's Day reminds us of another broken place as news about the soldiers involved with Blood Sunday also broke this week. We still have two of Patrick's letters which have little to do with shamrocks, snakes and shillelaghs. Patrick was a Roman citizen; people trafficked to Ireland as a slave escaping back to Britain on a pirate ship. He heard a call from God and returned to the place of his enslavement in order to discover hope there. He established his Irish Mission within a society ruled by small kings and warlords. The leaders of the church sneered at him because he only had schoolboy Latin. His self-confidence was low. He constantly failed to live up to his own vision of what it was to live authentically as a Christian. Yet he took on unruly and unaccountable powers when they were exploiting the little or the least. He took them on by voicing their pain and by being resolute in his weakness to not strike out but only to love.

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Jerusalem now as then was the complex city in which goodness and evil co-exist. It was the place to which people looked for their pots of gold but the contested place in which Jesus' great contest will be played out. Today's Gospel from Luke 13 makes it clear this story is a precursor story to the cross – as Luke says 'on the third day I finish my work'. These events will prefigure a transformation that will enable the early Christians to get beyond the politics of the Pharisees and the ghastly goings on of the likes of Herod the fox so that they could imagine a New Jerusalem, a heavenly city. We underestimate the leap of imagination required for that.

However it starts with Jesus addressing Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, Tetrarch of Galilee. He is the one who beheaded John Baptist and a man voracious for political power with no truck for prophets painting alternative visions of the truth. Jesus (spot on) calls him a fox. Foxes may be much loved of the people of Leicester reminding us of our football team that won the Premier League but foxes are scavengers and effective killers. Jesus is naming the violence intent on meeting its own needs which is manifest in Jerusalem and which must not be allowed to simply have sway. Jesus calls heard a fox!

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Jesus response to addressing the dysfunction and danger of the city is two-fold. He laments and he becomes vulnerable.

Lament is a Godly gift which helps to name and articulate our troubles before God. It is not a moan but rather a careful articulation of our heartfelt longings even when we have nothing else we can do. It is a means to wrestle with God and to be insistent about the question 'why' – why Christchurch, why these innocents? It is a way in which we make connection with everyone else who also asks that question through time and across cultures. It is a way to come near to Christ who uses lament from the cross 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me' just like Rachel of old who could not be comforted weeping in Ramah.

Our bibles are full of this complaint before God not least within the Psalms. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman notices in the Psalms a kind of threefold sequence that becomes typical of this faithful kind of lament. Firstly, he notices there is a time of orientation when we remember who we are in and under God. Secondly, there is a time of disorientation where we notice the fractures between us and the fractures between us and our vision of God. And finally thirdly in these texts of lament a new orientation emerges of hope. The reframes the entire sense of awareness or meaning even if our actual lived circumstances remain the same.

We as Christians need to develop and recover the habit of lament. I think we have forgotten how to do it partly because there is a weird comfort in despair and we know there is a danger in hope. Julia Esquivel, an exiled Guatemalan who has witnessed terrible abuses of power writes this about Christian hope emerging from despair - 'it is something within us that doesn't sleep, that doesn't let us rest, that won't stop pounding deep inside....what keeps us from sleeping is that they have **threatened us with resurrection!**' (see *Threatened with Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan*, 1994, Elgin, Il). Jesus laments as he heads into Jerusalem. It is a prelude to Easter. He is aware of the **threat of resurrection** and we are challenged to do the same. Without this real pain of lament there is little or no Easter. Learn to lament, try it and practice it this Lent like a child with a new instrument moving beyond the first scratches of notes to a song of lament and resurrection.

Finally, in confronting this fox Jesus chooses vulnerability: 'how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings' (v34b). There are plenty of female images for God in the Old Testament. That is not what is novel in this image. Here you will know that St Anselm spoke of Christ as Mother. Instead the novelty is the utter vulnerability. Jesus speaks of himself as mother hen, with warm wings waiting but chicks that want to do their own thing. In the face of such danger for those chicks with a fox slinking about, the mother hen makes herself more vulnerable and stands her ground. Jesus the mother hen does not offer the removal of danger but instead his unguarded open vulnerability, stands ground and does not remove himself to the side-lines and safety. This transformational love shows us new awareness of God so that we are able to join in with the bible writers in saying 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'

The phrase chicken still haunts many of us from our days in the school playground as those lacking in courage. Yet chicken is precisely the nick name for Jesus as he redefines courage through vulnerability. It has been a very difficult week in Westminster, in New Zealand, in Ireland and conflicted places across the world. The witness of Jesus is that through lament and through vulnerable hen-like love, foxes will get their comeuppance and hope will be born afresh in our world.

'Jerusalem, Jerusalem ...how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood?'

Amen.

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