

## FOX IN THE HENHOUSE

There's at least three surprises in this reading today and I'll tell you them right now.

Jesus turns out to have some unlikely friends.  
Jesus calls King Herod a fox.  
Jesus calls himself a hen!

So lets look a little closer.

The first surprise. *Jesus turns out to have some unlikely friends.*

'At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "*You must get out of here and go somewhere else, because Herod wants to kill you.*"'

There's a plot against Jesus. He's decided to go to Jerusalem, but Herod already knows about him and has decided to get rid of him.  
But the message that Jesus gets, warning him about this, comes from Pharisees.

It's Pharisees who are giving Jesus a heads-up about the plot. They're the ones tipping him off.

If you anything much about Jesus you know that Jesus and the Pharisees were always at loggerheads, and they always come over as the bad guys.  
We're used to thinking of them in a very negative light.

So this is a bit of a surprise.

Now historians are divided about the motives of this warning. It's not clear.  
Some say it goes to show that not all the Pharisees were bad. Think of Nicodemus for example. He was interested in listening to Jesus.  
They would say this incident goes to show the danger of over-generalising – that there were some Pharisees who (while not agreeing with Jesus) weren't going to sit back and watch him killed.

Other theologians think that the Pharisees were doing it from bad motives.  
You see, if they could turn Jesus back from Jerusalem, Jesus would lose face in the eyes of many of his supporters. Also, if Jesus was really to have a big impact he had to go to Jerusalem, and not just work in the countryside in obscure wee towns. If he *didn't* go to Jerusalem his mission would fail.  
So the jury's still out.

Personally I think if they were against him that much and wanted him stopped they would just have let him walk into the trap. After all, once he's killed they wont be having any more trouble from him any more.  
That'll be the end – won't it...?

So maybe the warning was well-meant after all.

Whatever you think, it comes from an unexpected source.

But Jesus isn't going to stop his plans - no matter what Herod thinks of him.  
 Jesus isn't going to be deflected from his mission.  
 No matter the threats, no matter the danger, he is heading for Jerusalem.  
 He knows his enemies are there but he knows he needs to confront them once  
 and for all.

The second surprise. *Jesus calls King Herod a fox!*

He says to the Pharisees that they can tell Herod that he is still going to come to  
 the city, despite the threats.  
 And he refers to Herod not by his name but as "that fox."

Now it goes without saying that calling the king 'that fox' is not really meant as a  
 compliment.

Certain kinds of animals have unfortunately got bad connotations and the fox is  
 one of them.

To be called a fox was to be thought of as sneaky and untrustworthy and  
 conniving.

But it gets worse, because foxes were also regarded as ruthless, destructive and  
 vicious creatures.

This is the very word Jesus uses to describe the King!

Some people say that Jesus wasn't political.

And that's true in one sense when you consider that Jesus never stood for  
 political office, or worked for local government. He wasn't part of the town  
 council and he didn't ally himself with any particular party like the Pharisees,  
 Sadducees, Essenes or Zealots - the latter group being like freedom fighters who  
 resisted the Romans with violence of their own.

He did not join any of these groups.

But in the broadest sense, Jesus was very political.

He was hugely concerned as to how people organised themselves and lived  
 together and treated one another.

He cared about what was going on.

He was passionate about justice, and deliberately placed himself on the side of  
 the poor and forgotten.

If people were being mistreated he spoke out for them.

If people were being rejected or ostracised by the respectable and religious, then  
 he would spend more time with them.

He took the side of the poor against the rich,

of women who were thought inferior by men,

and of foreigners who were regarded as suspect by the locals.

He took issue with the religious who created rules to make them look good and  
 others bad.

He took issue with the corrupt economic practices taking place at the Temple – the very heart and centre of Jewish life.

And he did not acquiesce with the Romans who had overrun his country. By speaking out against Herod he was also criticising the Romans who had placed him there as king.

Calling the king “**that fox**” was a very dangerous thing to do.

Although Jesus never resorted to violence, his message was clear, and (like the prophets before him) he was not prepared to be silent but always ready to speak out for truth and justice and accept the consequences.

King Herod was an evil man, a corrupt ruler, a thug in a high place and Jesus wasn’t afraid to say so, and tell the truth to the world.

Despite the risk that speaking out entailed, Jesus was ready to witness to what was true.

The third surprise. *Jesus calls himself a hen!*

People often imagine that when Jesus speaks about his pain over the fate of Jerusalem he was actually physically looking out at the city.

That might be true.

Jerusalem is itself a city built on a hill but (from other even higher hills around it) it is a place that you can take in from a distance. It’s an impressive sight looking over to Jerusalem.

And Jesus looks out at this city and he tells his listeners,  
*“You kill the prophets, you stone the messengers God sent you. How many times have I wanted to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.”*

Jesus knows the trouble Jerusalem faces.

And so he says he wants to defend it like a mighty.....ahem,....hen!!!

A mighty hen????

I came across this on the Internet. A blogger uses *this* name to describe herself.  
 MOTHER HEN STRIKES AGAIN!

Of course it’s a bit of a joke.

A “mother hen” seems an unlikely creature to be doing anything interesting or important. A mother hen is unlikely to inspire confidence or leave people in awe. It’s a joke.

But Jesus says he wants to defend like a hen.....

Couldn’t he have thought of something more inspiring?

Think of the other images he could have chosen....

What about the mighty eagle of Exodus,  
the stealthy leopard of Hosea or  
the great Lion of Judah mowing down enemies with a roar.

There are so many great images he could have used - but he speaks of this one.

And he's got a good reason.

Picture this scene.

Somewhere out in the countryside a farm has caught fire.  
And a whole team of fire-fighters have been called to the scene. They've finally  
quelled the blaze and they are walking through the charred remains of the house  
and outbuildings.

One of the fire-fighters comes across the burned carcass of a mother hen lying  
near the entrance to a barn. He casually kicks the body to one side as he moves  
past it - only to get a fright!

Suddenly there is movement everywhere and a whole group of tiny chickens are  
running around in all directions. They had been kept safe from the blaze by their  
mother who had shielded them with her own body.

The hen had died -but not before she had kept her family alive.

This scene has been repeated many times. In the case of danger or fire a mother  
hen will sacrifice her own life so that others can live.

The mother hen will do no violence but will sacrifice herself for the sake of her  
children.

Jesus' response to violence is to absorb it and defeat it in himself.

I guess the two names Jesus uses: "fox" and "hen," are showing us two parts of  
what Jesus is about.

When it comes to injustice and standing up and being counted Jesus is  
determined to do something about it. He names it for what it is.

He is not frightened of the authorities or the consequences.

But as a man of peace committed to non-violence, he will not resort to violence  
to get his own way.

Jesus is the non-violent one, yet he stands up to violence and protects us from it.

Jesus does not turn a blind eye to reality. He does what he can to be part of the  
solution. He is not afraid to name and confront those who are doing wrong.  
Like the prophets before him, he is angry at injustice, passionate about defending  
the poorest and weakest and ready to take a stand on their behalf.

This is the season of Lent when we look at our own lives and ask how we are  
following Jesus.

How do we follow Jesus in this...?

On the one hand, we do it by working for peace and living peacefully.  
 On the other hand, we do not wash our hands of trouble or hide away or stay passively silent when things are unjust or unfair.  
 We are ready to support others; to take a stand for them and let our voice be heard.

Let me finish with the words of an old Franciscan blessing.

*May God bless you with **discomfort** at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with **anger** at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May God bless you with **tears** to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.*

*May God bless you with enough **foolishness** to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.*

*May the peace of God and the God of peace  
 be with you for evermore.*

This is a prayer for all of us.

As we seek to learn from Jesus in this season of Lent,  
 Let's remember both his commitment to nonviolence and peacemaking,  
 and his courage to speak out and act against injustice.

And with God's help, may we also follow his example.

Luke 13: 31-35 (Lent 2)

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