

Sermon 13 March 2022

Luke 13:31-35

The thrust of this passage is that Jesus has a destiny to fulfil, a mission to accomplish, and it is fraught with danger, to the extent that it involves death. *'Yet today, tomorrow, and on the third day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.'* Verse 33.

In the beginning of this passage Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and we hear the Pharisees warning Jesus to seek somewhere safe because Herod wants to kill him. Jesus' response makes two things clear. Firstly, his opinion of Herod, not surprisingly, was not very flattering. It was widely known that Herod was only in the position of power that he was because the Romans wanted a thug to maintain order in one of their far-flung territories.

Jesus refers to him as a fox. A fox is a sly, cruel animal. You might remember the story of the gingerbread man who evaded the clutches of the elderly couple who made him, a dog, a cow and a horse but not the sly fox who persuaded the gingerbread man to climb on his back in order to cross the river and halfway across tossed him in the air and gobbled him up.

The second point Jesus makes clearly is that his fate is to die but it won't be at the hands of Herod, and in the meantime he will continue his with his ministry. His fate, indeed, lies in Jerusalem.

Jesus then uses a lovely analogy to describe his feelings for Jerusalem: *How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.'* Verse 34. There are two elements to this image. Firstly, the elements of protectiveness, of caring. Nothing carries a more powerful picture of caring than of a mother and her children.

Secondly, this picture of a hen and her chicks conveys to us a sense of sacrifice. It is common amongst parents to have such a strong feeling of love for their children that they would gladly be prepared to die for them. There is no question that a mother hen would be prepared to put her life on the line for her chicks.

An article in the National Geographic magazine some years ago told of how a ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes on the ground at the base of a tree following a forest fire. Somewhat sickened by the sight, he knocked over the bird with a stick and three chicks scurried from under their dead mother's wings. The loving mother could have flown to safety but had refused to abandon her babies.

So let's go back to the main thrust of this passage. Jesus has a destiny to fulfil. He is to go to Jerusalem and die. He knows this only too well. *'Because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.'* Verse 33. He understands he has to go through this and why he

has to go through this. He understands his death is but a prelude to a new journey, a new beginning. *'And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."'* Verse 35. Let me illustrate with a story.

A martial arts student kneels before his master sensei in a ceremony to receive the hard-earned Black Belt. After years of relentless training, the student has finally reached a pinnacle of achievement in the discipline.

The master solemnly tells the young man, 'Before granting the Black Belt, you must pass one more test.' 'I'm ready,' responds the student expecting one more round of sparring.

'You must answer the essential question: What is the true meaning of the Black Belt?' The student replies, 'Why, the end of my journey. A well-deserved reward for my hard work.'

The master waits for more. Clearly he is not satisfied. He finally speaks, 'You are not ready for the Black Belt. Return in one year.'

A year later, the student kneels before the master and again he is asked the question, 'What is the true meaning of the Black Belt?' 'It is a symbol of distinction and the highest achievement in our art,' the young man replies.

Again, the master waits for more. Still unsatisfied, he says once more, 'You are not ready for the Black Belt. Return in one year.'

A year later, the student again kneels before the master and hears the question, 'What is the true meaning of the Black Belt?' This time he answers, 'The Black Belt represents not the end, but the beginning, the start of a never-ending journey of discipline, work and pursuit of an even higher standard.'

'Yes,' says the master, 'you are now ready to receive the Black Belt and begin your work.'

This illustrates very well the situation with Jesus. There is no question that he had put in the hard yards through his ministry over the three years, but the real challenge was about to come, and once dealt with, he would begin a much longer ministry seated at the right hand of God in his glorious kingdom but remaining available to us as God's representative, as a link to God as a comforter, a guide, healer and helper.

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