



Lent 2, Year C – February 28, 2010

Luke 13:31-35

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham

Some of you may recall that several weeks ago, we talked about catfish. Today, it's a fox and a hen. The fox is a metaphor for Herod. The hen is a simile for Jesus. Yes, even in the United States, some of us were blessed with a good English class now and then. And as I observed several weeks ago, and Bob Pynn so eloquently stated in his homily at 10.30 last Sunday – it's on line and I heartily recommend it to you – when we see that the writers of scripture used literary devices like similes and metaphors, we also see what a dynamic and living document the Bible can be.

And Luke was an artful writer – he apparently was well taught in Greek, the language he wrote in. And if tradition is correct that Luke was a physician, we can assume he was well-educated, and his ability with language – though not necessarily handwriting – should be no surprise. He is, indeed, a superb storyteller. How easily we are drawn into this scene from Jesus' life. Standing alone, it is a mere five verses, but they are five verses rich in meaning. We can learn much of the substance of Jesus' message without reading another word of Luke's Gospel. This, like Luke's use of simile and metaphor, reveals an author who could write compelling prose. And, unlike most theologians I have encountered, use a minimum of words for a maximum of impact.

In this mini-episode of Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem, a journey which ends in the seminal events of our tradition, we can distil a metaphor and a simile down to a single word: judgment. In Jesus characterization of Herod as a fox and himself as a brood hen, Jesus presents the basic choice that confronted the people of Jerusalem, the same choice that we confront every day in our own lives. Where do we place our trust? Do we place it Herod? In the fox? Herod was part of the ruling class, the elite who sustained their position and power through cunning, calculating, and scheming. They were dangerous and predatory. Those who placed their trust in Herod and his ilk were just as likely to be devoured by the sly fox.

On the other hand, we have Jesus, the hen who wants nothing more than to brood over her young and protect them from the fox. What an image of Jesus! A hen. Feminine by definition. And as animals go, not very intelligent. Not very powerful. But still fiercely protective. Loving her young with unswerving devotion.

Now, for any of you that are English teachers, note that Luke uses the fox as metaphor. Herod is in all ways what a fox was thought to be. Cunning. Voracious. Destructive. But for Jesus. Luke uses only the simile, "as a hen gathers her young under her wings." So he avoids describing Jesus as in all respects like a hen, but focuses on the protective instinct of a mother for her young.

Yet, as Jesus laments, Jerusalem would not listen. They failed to understand that even on his way to crucifixion in Jerusalem, Jesus refused to be intimidated or sidetracked. To be rushed or delayed. Jesus had placed his trust in God and kept to God's, not Herod's schedule. So instead of gathering under the loving wings of their mother, they align with the earthly power of Herod and imperial Rome. And the irony is that within 40 years of Christ's crucifixion, Rome would destroy the great temple in Jerusalem.

Where do we place our trust? In a loving God or in the promises of the powerful? Do we ever really comprehend, as Jerusalem– the nation of Israel – could not, that faith in supposedly powerful human institutions and worldly values is misplaced? We might feel safe as long as the fox pretends allegiance to us, but we have no assurance that when its self interest demands it, the fox will turn us into prey. Ask anyone whose loyalty to a job has been rewarded by a pink slip when times got tough. Consider that the golden rope we grasp may shine brightly, but is really soft and lacking in strength and durability. Then, when the rope no longer can sustain our yanking and tugging, as Jesus says, our house is left to us; we are left to fend for ourselves.

This is the judgment that will be visited on us when our faith, our trust, is placed in the fox.

Yet, we have an alternative. How often, Jesus says, does he want to gather us under his wings? To love us and protect us. That offer is always on the table. It will be on the table this morning in the form of bread and wine. In receiving the bread and wine, the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, we will be accepting the invitation to God's table and God's love, to gather under God's wings as beloved children. And deny the fox dominion over our lives.

That is the choice. A choice we should ponder with renewed intensity in Lent, a time of reflection and repentance. Do we place our trust in the ways of the world – or in the love of God.

Amen.