

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Foxes, Chickens and Jerusalem: threat, enfoldment and transformation

...yet I must be on my way because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem. In Luke Jesus is cast as a prophet destined for Jerusalem, which can mean only one thing. Earlier Jesus made it clear the cost of the journey is shared by those who wish to go with him. *Foxes have holes, and birds their nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.* Foxes and birds are mentioned again today. Herod is cast as a fox, a wily creature who likes chicken for supper. Jesus is like the mother hen who loves her silly chicks, and does all she can to protect them from predators. Although the Pharisees appear to be helpful in warning Jesus of Herod, their words may be mischievous. The real danger is Jerusalem: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chickens, and you were not willing.* In Jerusalem God's reluctant, resistant people will make an end to Jesus. But none of this deters him from this journey which is central to his mission. It transforms him, and the faith of all who follow.

The journey is a rich and universal symbol. Consider the Lord of the Rings, the Hobbit, Ulysses. In biblical story the lives of Abraham, Moses and Jesus all involve journeys. The text from Genesis deals with a crucial aspect of Abraham's journey, and the Gospel reading is taken from a the long section which begins when, in Luke 9, Jesus resolutely sets his face to go to Jerusalem. In Lent we make this journey with Jesus, and it is worth remembering there are two ways to travel. As a searcher on a quest for something that is yet to be obtained. Or as a pilgrim, one who is already in receipt of a promise which points forward to a goal laid up. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote that the difference between Abraham and Ulysses was that Abraham and Sarah left Ur of the Chaldeans on the basis of trust in an open ended promise made by God, whom they have only begun to know. On the other hand Ulysses leaves home on a quest that he survives through wit and luck. Jesus travels, knowing his mission in life was confirmed at his Baptism and reaffirmed at the transfiguration. But this does not mean the journey will be free of stress, struggle, and perilous encounters with darkness.

Jerusalem was the destination, a symbolic city of many layered meaning. Situated in the land promised long before to Abram and his descendants, Jerusalem is the place where God's name will rest. A city of Shalom

where it is intended God's healing, justice and unity will be manifest. In the New Testament it became the symbol of the Messiah's Kingdom, open to the whole world. In the Book of Revelation the New Jerusalem stands for the new order God will bring in at the end of time. This is not Paradise restored. It represents God's new work, a habitation gifted to all people with Jesus, the Lamb of God, at the centre. Jerusalem expresses something that reaches to time beyond time, crossing the domain between heaven and earth.

For biblical people Jerusalem held the utmost significance. But when the city became the site of gross unfaithfulness God sent prophets to deliver messages that challenged the inhabitants to change. God's love for Jerusalem was not a blank cheque. It included a call to right living, but people demonstrated a tendency to resist God and shoot the bearer of this message. Jerusalem is the theatre where the fortunes of the people of God and the world are worked out.

On his journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus heals and casts out enslaving spirits. His progress unseats the powers of darkness and puts them to flight. There is a link between this and Jesus' intentions for Jerusalem, which are generous, warm and nurturing. He manifests the persistent, patient love of God who continues to yearn for a holy people and comes in search of them to gather them in, despite their fickle resistance. Jesus knows the other side of Jerusalem. Yet here, and again in Luke 19, he is pictured lamenting and weeping over the city. In our reading the talk of Jesus' three days work evokes the great three days of Easter, in which he continues to manifest the warm acceptance reflected in the reading today. It is in Luke that, at the end, Jesus cries, "forgive them, they know not what they do", and just before he dies says to the thief "today you will be with me in paradise." In amongst the unleashed power of savagery, Jesus continues to manifest not the cunning of the fox or the cruelty of wild beasts, but the guileless, enfolding warmth of the hen.

For Christians a translation takes place between Jerusalem and Jesus at Easter. After Palm Sunday, when the crowds sang: *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*, and then turned with rage and spite against him, the place of Jerusalem is superseded by Christ. The rejected one becomes the cornerstone in a new Temple of living stones: the Spirit filled community of the Church. A new covenant is established, not sealed in the blood of animals and birds as with Abram, but in the blood of Christ - symbol of his complete self-giving, a gift of the continuing grace of God. Jerusalem is the site for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, and is the place from which the gospel goes forth to all the world. From now on what matters is not geography, but community. Not a site, but a great, inclusive worldwide fellowship, the purpose of which is to honour God in worship and service. Because of what happens in Jesus Christ a transformation takes place in the landscape of faith. In him the saving mission of God is

enacted in a way that breaks all boundaries and renders geography obsolete.

In Lent we journey in Spirit to Jerusalem and travel again through the heartland of our story as church. It is a journey of discipleship. A friend always used to say “you have to go to Jerusalem”. That is, in response to the call you have to go forward and risk what you have and what you know in a spirit of faith and perseverance, you cannot defer the journey. How do we know when to move? The call may come to us in many ways. It may involve arriving at a new insight, which implies a call to move on or change direction. It may involve an impulse to repair a relationship or end one; to lay down a burden or pick one up, to change cities or jobs or both. But if that is the call we may respond safely, even if it involves sacrifice, because we already know the end of the story. From terrifying darkness the amazing grace of God bursts forth to bring new life where none was expected. This very deed is a challenge, and amounts to an amazing offer, which calls us to live against the destructiveness of death in all its forms. How remarkable that even in today’s reading there are examples of those who when faced with this new opportunity were too casual, or too afraid in their response. To “go with Jesus to Jerusalem” means being willing to sacrifice what we have and what we know for the sake of letting it be reborn in a new form. And we may do this, because God is one who, after all, longs to gather us in as a hen lovingly gathers her chicks. In Lent we ask how ready are we to renew our yes to this warm and loving, wondrous initiative of grace?