

Year C Lent 2

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Philippians 3:17 – 4:3

Luke 13: 31-35

Lamenting God's vision

Our gospel reading starts with a verse that we can quickly move on from, to get to the real meat of the gospel action, and in the process miss what I think is an important point. The verse, verse 31, is one sentence, 'At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'

It isn't remarkable that Herod wanted to do harm to Jesus. After all Herod had imprisoned John the Baptist and had him executed to please Salome. So, we might expect Herod to have a similar end in mind for this wandering preacher that many were calling King or Messiah. Herod was very anxious about anyone claiming the title of King. He needed to show his Roman overlords that he was the powerful king ruling his territory.

What struck me as remarkable is that in the gospels the pharisees are portrayed as nearly always working against Jesus; being part of plots to attack him or have him arrested. And yet... on this occasion, we find a group of pharisees warning Jesus about King Herod's intentions towards him. We can also recall from chapter 3 of John's gospel that Nicodemus, a pharisee, sought out Jesus, and said he knew he was from God. In John's gospel Nicodemus bought spices to embalm Jesus' body when he was taken down from the cross.

The pharisee movement was created by lay people to live a life apart from other Jews, so that they could live and adhere to all the laws of

Moses. Their lives were focussed on not transgressing any of the laws in Leviticus and the laws found in Exodus and the many laws reiterated in Deuteronomy. The Pharisees got so focussed in complying with the laws that, as a group, they forgot the overall aims and objectives of the laws; they became overly obsessed with their compliance with those laws. No wonder Jesus was frequently critical of the pharisees and used them as an example of what not to do if you wished to participate in God's kingdom on earth.

And yet, here we have some pharisees warning Jesus about the dangers of continuing his teaching and healing in that place. This is a very timely reminder that a group given a particular name and identity is seldom, if ever, a homogenous group sharing and living out 100% what others may portray them to be.

It is a common trap we fall into. We tend to use broad classifications and categories and apply them with a broad brush. In this case, if we follow the general and overall message in the Gospels, every single Pharisee must be opposed to Jesus. The picture painted is that the pharisees were always seeking to trap Jesus with their questions. The pharisees, every single one of them are not to be trusted.

And yet, here we have some pharisees genuinely warning Jesus. I don't think they were using it as a ruse to get him to stop his ministry. We are left with the utterly reasonable conclusion that not all pharisees are alike; not all pharisees, it would appear, were immune to the teachings and ministry of Jesus. Clearly some had time for him and may have been questioning their identity as a pharisee and all that meant for their lifestyle. This should not surprise us, as we read the powerful stories of Jesus' ministry and his message of God's love, grace and mercy, and imagine its impact on the people.

We then come to the main subject of this reading; Jesus voicing out loud the inevitability of his fate; being a prophet heading for

Jerusalem with a clear message from God to be proclaimed to the religious and political authorities alike.

Jesus has his own personal period of lamentation. It is not a self-pitying lamentation, but in the true tradition of lamentation it is for the people who did not wish to receive his teachings, who were stiff-necked and hard-hearted. They would not experience the homecoming to God that he was offering.

Jesus described that return to God as being like sheltering under a hen's wings, safely gathered in together, in God's care. Jesus laments those who didn't hear his teachings, saying "How often have I desired to gather you..." It is a lamentation overflowing with love and compassion for all those who chose not to listen or to understand the signs given through his healings.

Jesus also laments the fact that the rejection by Israel of the kingdom of God will inevitably lead them away from peace and safety to troubling times ahead. Jesus says they will only see him at his second coming when they will say, "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Lamentation. It sounds an anachronistic practice, belonging to another age. But, I wonder, does the practice of lamentation have something to offer to us?

Does the ability to lament help transform us and help us on our pilgrimage through life?

What, of our own experiences and elements of our being might it be constructive and good to sit with in an attitude of lamentation?

What does an attitude of lamentation look like to us?

Lamentation should be a period of inner reflection, guided by the Holy Spirit, to honestly reflect on the obstacles that have impeded our spiritual development and growth in our life. Lamentation invites us to reflect on God's love, grace and mercy for us, for the example

of Jesus' love and compassion, and to use that to seek out the hope for a new path, for a resetting of our lives, that will lead us towards the promise contained in the Easter message. In Lent, taking stock and knowing who we are, is an appropriate spiritual discipline. In Lent, our spiritual stock-take may help us realise we are not quite on the path heading in the right direction that we thought we were on. Lifting our heads, looking back at the path in life that we have trodden, seeing where we might need to change direction in order to follow the way of Christ and acknowledging our deviations from the true path, is a timely activity to engage with.

I want to end this sermon with a thought about the brooding hen, under whose wings Jesus wished to gather the people of Jerusalem. It is a wonderful image of God and of God's vision for all of God's people; the gathering in of all of God's children, held in a warm embrace of love and protection. Jesus lived and breathed that vision throughout his ministry and lamented that many of the people were not willing to participate in that vision.

Today, as with deep sadness we continue to receive news of war and killing in Ukraine, let us seek to love Ukrainians and Russians alike.

Let us reflect on those times in our lives when we have focussed on laws rather than the more challenging approach of imitating Jesus and loving our neighbour as ourselves.

Let us seek ways to lament that will lead us to a new understanding of Jesus in our lives and what our pilgrimage through life, in faith, looks like afresh for us.

And let us see how the care by the mother hen can inform us in how we are to care for one another, and for all of God's children.