

## Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

Lent 2 - 28<sup>th</sup> February 2010

### **Readings:**

#### **Luke 13:31-35**

(Traditional prayer from India.)

**Dear God, as a hen covers her chicks with her wings, to keep them safe, protect us this day under your golden wings. AMEN.**

As some of you already know, I'm a great fan of Michael Leunig. He's the nearest thing we have to a prophet in Australia today. And like most prophets he attracts a lot of flack for some of his cartoons. Here's one that caught my eye a few years back and it certainly caused a stir at the time. About a little clever missile.

Chilling isn't it. Chilling but true.

Jerusalem, the name has come to mean "City of peace" for Jew and Christian alike. For Arabs and Muslims the name is "el Kuds", the holy town. and it is to this place, the most "religious city on earth, that our smart little missile goes. Three world religions each espousing Christ's peace, Yahweh's shalom, Allah's salaam. Three world religions that still cannot agree. So Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is just as relevant as it was some 2000 years ago. "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 brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

I don't know about you but I shake my head in despair each time I hear of the continual senseless cycle of violence, and wonder when and how it will end.

We live in confusing and distressing times. But no more confusing or distressing than the first century that Jesus found himself in. For Jesus too would have been faced with a rapidly changing world. One where political power was no longer handled by familiar figures, but by a world power, who demanded loyalty to a distant and strange overlord. One where commercial life was becoming globalized or Romanized which amounted to the same thing back then.

One where diverse religious traditions were tolerated as long as they did not make waves. There were Roman craven images in the Temple for goodness sake. Allowed by the high priests!

And for Jesus, Jerusalem was the centre of this rich cauldron of community life. And in accordance with his father's will Jesus is about to plunge headfirst into that cauldron called Jerusalem.

Jesus lived in confused and distressing times.

And the text in Luke's gospel this morning is a microcosm of this confusion. The story is full of conflicting intentions and conflicting interpretations of events.

First, "some pharisees" warn Jesus of Herod's desire to kill him. This warning seems well intentioned. (something worth noting given the tendency in other gospels that tend to heighten and generalize the antagonism between Jesus and the Pharisees.) At any rate, Jesus sees this concern about political danger as a distraction from his religious calling. So he ignores them.

In addition to the Pharisees, Herod Antipas comes into play. According to the text he intends to get rid of Jesus but Jesus regards the tetrarch's plans as irrelevant to his own destiny. Jesus must instead go to Jerusalem where prophets are killed by their own audience, not at the hands of Herod. So he ignores them.

But then there is Jesus' concern for the people of Jerusalem. Perhaps he realises how lost they are given Roman occupation, Herod's authority based on his puppet kingdom, and the strange goings on at the Temple. Jesus just wants to gather the people of Jerusalem together "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" but they aren't willing, and so another conflicting intention enters the story. They choose to wander around open the depredations of the the fox.

Jesus can do nothing for them save lament and so, "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 brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

No wonder Jesus wept! If you've ever loved someone you could not protect and you see them doing self-destructive things, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Such a posture leaves you open, vulnerable and our vulnerability is often the only power we have. Not only does Jesus tell stories like the Prodigal Son, he lives them out to the end.

But let me dwell upon image of the mother hen spreading her wings to shelter her chicks. It's grabbed my imagination. I don't know about you but I think it is the most vulnerable posture in the world. Wings spread - breast exposed. Saying take me but you won't get my chicks.

And given the number of animals available, it curious indeed that Jesus would chose a hen for an image of God. I mean where's the biblical precedent for that? What about the mighty eagle of Exodus. Or Hosea's stealthy leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared with all of these, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. It's no wonder that some of the chicks decided to side with the fox a few weeks later.

But a hen is what he chooses - which when you think about it is pretty typical of Jesus. He's the one that is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind

up on top whilst kings and scholars land on the bottom. He's the one who's always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first.

So of course he chooses a chook, which is about as far from a fox that you can get. Jesus has not come to be a king like Herod the fox.  
He not a predator, he's a protector.

Jesus will not be king of the jungle in this story or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen who stands between her chicks and those who mean them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants to kill them, he'll have to kill her first.

And he does, as it turns out. He slides in one night into the coop, whilst her chicks are asleep. When her cry awakens them, they scatter, she dies the next day where both chicken and foxes can see her, wings spread, breast exposed, without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart, but her chicks have been redeemed. They're safe.  
And story continues.

The story is the hope for Jerusalem. A story of hope for all those places where senseless war rages. And it's a story is the hope for this country, over pre-occupied with and fearful for its security and its wealth. To believe otherwise is to hand the chicken run over to the foxes of this confusing and distressing age, where our leaders run around like headless chooks!

Finally a story that I read recently. I believe this is a Christ story.

#### The silent testimony of angels' wings

In 1998, student Matthew Shepard was beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die in Laramie, Wyoming. Shepard was gay, which was why his attackers killed him. At his funeral, some protesters planned to carry signs that expressed hate for Matthew. Not wanting this indignity to be seen by Shepard's family and friends, his friend Romaine Patterson organized a group of people to don huge angel wings and stand in a silent circle around the protesters, with their wings blocking the messages of hate.

Since that time, other groups have followed this example, surrounding other protesters and, by their mute witness, effectively silencing messages of violence and intolerance.

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