

# The Fox and the Hen ...

## *... the power of love, faithfulness and compassion*

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*A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Lent, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Luke 13:31-end*

I wonder what picture comes into your mind when I say the word 'God'? Maybe you instinctively picture the welcoming embrace of a loving father; or the guiding hand of a shepherd or teacher; The power and majesty of a King, perhaps; or maybe the severity of a judge. There are many different images that might pop into our heads when we're trying to think about God. And in our Gospel reading, there are two images that are worth pondering, though one of them is clearly not about God.

Jesus calls King Herod a fox, and he compares himself to a hen. And it's no accident that those two images are used in the same passage. Why does Jesus call King Herod a fox? Well, because foxes are thieves and murderers. When they get into a hen-house, they cause mayhem, killing everything inside, whether they eat it or not.

So Jesus is saying Herod is a thief, taking what doesn't belong to him - that is setting himself up as King of the Jews, he is occupying the throne of God's Messiah. But no one is fooled. He's a usurper, a thief, and Jesus implies he is a murderer, overseeing the killing of the prophets. And indeed, in due course, Herod does collude in the killing of Jesus himself.

One of the carvings on the medieval seats in Beverley Minster Quire shows the medieval fable of the Fox disguised as a preacher preaching to a congregation of geese. Sadly, we don't know the original story that this refers to. It may have been some kind of satire on the clergy (heaven forbid), but we get the idea. The fox is sly, he's wily, he creeps around under cover of night, and he's not to be trusted, especially when there are geese or hens around.

And it's not just Herod, is it? The world has seen no shortage of fox-like kings and rulers. It's not difficult to think of powerful autocrats today whose words cannot be trusted, who present themselves as paternal benefactors of their people when actually they're corrupt and use their position to accumulate wealth for themselves and their cronies, and meanwhile send helpless conscripts to fight on the front lines

of unnecessary wars. And we might ask, in a world of foxes, in a world of ruthless autocrats like King Herod, what kind of God do we need? What kind of God makes a difference? What kind of God can deal effectively with the Herods of this world?

And you might, first of all, think we need a God who will put the fox in its place, a God who is more like a lion, perhaps, who is bigger and more powerful than the fox, who can beat the fox at its own game. But instead of offering the image of God as a lion or a tiger or a bear, or something big and powerful and invincible, what Jesus actually offers is the image of a hen. To the people of Jerusalem, he says, *"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings?"* So by comparing himself to a hen, Jesus is not offering an image of power or superior force or might. Instead, he's offering an image of protection. He is the one who will protect his chicks from the fox, and he's offering an image of family. When the mother hen senses danger, she gathers her chicks under her wings so that any predator doesn't see the chicks, it sees only the mother.

Jesus is perhaps suggesting that unlike Herod, who would make short work of the chicks, Jesus identifies with his people, so much so that he is willing to stand in their place to offer his life that they may go free. So the hen is an image of protection, an image of family, and an image of sacrifice, of giving up his life so that others might receive life.

So which is the greater, the fox or the hen? You might think it's obviously the fox, and if you pit the one against the other, it's no contest - the hen is clearly not going to survive. But look again at this particular fox and this particular hen. Who today remembers King Herod? He wouldn't be remembered at all if it wasn't as a footnote in the New Testament, when he's presented simply as a bit-player who colludes with Jesus's death; and who today remembers Jesus Christ? Well, almost everyone and billions of people worship him as their living Lord.

So what about the Herods of our own day? I may as well name names, because it seems to me President Putin has some pretty fox-like qualities: his words can't be trusted; he steals what isn't his; and he's causing wanton, destruction and misery, affecting the lives of millions. But where will he be in 2000 years time? If he's remembered at all, we can be sure it won't be as the model of a successful leader. But you can be pretty confident that if there are still people on this Earth in 2000

years time, Jesus Christ will still be worshipped and his name will still be blessed as the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

So we don't need to feel helpless and depressed in the face of the naked power that is on display in Ukraine. You are part of the Universal Church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Your prayers make a difference, and so do your gifts and your messages of support for your suffering brothers and sisters in Christ.

And when we ask where God is in this situation, don't be seduced into looking for images of power and might, as if God can sort everything out for us. Think rather of Jesus, the mother hen, suffering with us and with those in Ukraine and assuring them of his love, his faithfulness and his compassion - qualities which he has already shown are stronger than those of the fox ,and which will turn out actually to be stronger, even than death itself.

## Reading Texts

Luke 13:31-end

<sup>31</sup> At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' <sup>32</sup> He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. <sup>33</sup> Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." <sup>34</sup>

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! <sup>35</sup> See, your house is left to you.

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." '