

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 17th March 2019

Luke 13: 31 - 35

What would you think if someone came to you – on the QT – and said, “I heard that so-and-so says that someone else doesn't like you”? What would you think, if someone came to you and said, “I don't mind what you're doing, I'm just saying that someone else does, so I think you should stop doing it otherwise there will be trouble”? What would you think if someone came to you with a complaint about your behaviour or something that you were doing, and said to you, “It's not me you understand, I'm just saying what I heard some else say. They don't like what you're doing, so you should stop or there will be trouble.” What would you think?

Personally, for me, it depends on who the messenger is. If it is someone whom I trust, or someone who is a friend, or someone who isn't the gossiping sort, then I would listen. But, if it was someone who had it in for me, someone who I couldn't trust, someone who was always having a go, so to speak, then I would be suspicious of that person's motives, and of whether they had even heard anything in the first place.

At that time a number of Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “You should leave this place and go on your way; Herod is out to kill you.”¹

That was the opening verse of our reading this morning from the Gospel. What do you think Jesus should think? Should he trust the Pharisees when they tell him what Herod said, or should he be a bit suspicious of their motives?

We're talking about Herod Antipas who was Tetrarch in Galilee, a Roman puppet king who pretty much held absolute power – in Galilee. On the one hand Herod was a homicidal maniac, just ask John the Baptist, so it's very possible he wanted to kill Jesus.

On the other hand, although Herod had murdered John the Baptist because John had taken issue with Herod's marital morality, it wasn't as straightforward as that – Herod had put himself in a corner, and he couldn't get out of it, and John was killed.

It seems too, that Herod was quite interested in Jesus' ministry was doing, he even wanted to meet Jesus. Luke writes in chapter 9 of his Gospel that Herod said,

“... who is this I hear such talk about.” And Herod was anxious to see Jesus. Alive, presumably.

But, there's something more, that should make us wonder a bit about Herod Antipas, something very intriguing that Luke tells us about in chapter 8. Listen to this from chapter 8, verses 1 - 3,

¹ Luke 13: 31

After this Jesus went journeying from town to town and village to village proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. With him there were the Twelve and a number of women who had been set free from evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, known as Mary of Magdala, from whom seven devils had come out; Joanna, **the wife of Chuza a steward of Herod's**; Susanna, and many others. These women provided for Jesus and the Twelve **out of their own resources**.

To sum up: Jesus and the disciples – all men - were travelling around Galilee encountering evil spirits, curing lepers, and all the rest of it, and with them was a group of women who, when the bill came for dinner or the overnight at the local hotel, were the ones writing the cheques.

We should never stop reminding those who think that the role of women in the church should be restricted, that Christianity only got off the ground because it was first bankrolled by women. Where were these women getting this money from? Well, perhaps Mary of the Seven Devils had a bit tucked away, but my guess is that Joanna, who was married to Chuza, who was Herod's steward, was not short of a bob or two. Did Herod know that his steward's wife was paying Jesus' bills? Who knows, but there is enough there to suggest that Herod's attitude to Jesus might not have been quite what the Pharisees said it was.

So, when the Pharisees went to Jesus and said that Herod wanted to kill him, for me, something just isn't adding up. I suspect that the Pharisees have their own agenda here.

Jesus answered them by saying, "'Go and tell that fox'". Calling Herod a fox is no small thing. Although Herod had been put in place by the Roman Empire, he was also Jewish. There's no doubt that Herod saw himself not as a fox, but as a lion, the traditional national and cultural symbol for Jewish kings. A fox on the other hand, in Judaism, symbolised a pretender or a weakling. Calling Herod a fox, as Jesus did, was either a very brave or a very stupid thing to do.

Either way, what do you think? Do you think that the Pharisees took that message – Jesus calls you a fox - back to Herod? Would you be the messenger who went to Herod and told him that he was a fox? No, I wouldn't either.

The Pharisees wanted Jesus to stop proclaiming the good news that God's kingdom could be present here and now amongst those who were the amongst the most marginalised people, so the Pharisees gambled. They used Herod's homicidal reputation to frighten Jesus, bullying him in to stopping doing what he was doing – all that really annoying stuff like casting out devils and working cures,

"Listen, today and tomorrow I shall be casting devils and working cures," he said in our reading.

The Pharisees want him to stop because he was undermining their authority, power and place in society, so they threatened him with Herod. But, Jesus came right back at them. *Oh, really? Herod told you that he's going to kill me, did he. Well, you go and tell him that he's a fox.* That is what is known as calling someone's bluff. But, what's more, Jesus didn't just call the Pharisees bluff, he then he raised the stakes.

If you don't leave Galilee you'll be killed by Herod, the Pharisees said. Jesus' reply was, go and tell Herod he is a fox, and in any case being murdered in the rural, backwater of Galilee where no one will notice is nothing. If I'm going to be killed, I'm going to make sure it happens in Jerusalem in front of everyone. He said,

"...I must be on my way today and tomorrow and the next day, because it is unthinkable for a prophet to meet his death anywhere but in Jerusalem."

This plan that the Pharisees had, the intimidating plan backed up by violence, to get Jesus out of the way, spectacularly backfired. They thought this threat to his life would stop Jesus doing what he was doing, but it only encouraged him. He didn't back down, he doubled-down. He wasn't intimidated by bullying, he confronted it. He didn't doff his cap to power and kingship, he ridiculed it. He didn't run away from the threat of violence, he ran towards it.

Of course, in life there are always times when discretion is the better part of valour. Of course, there are. In fact, in Jesus' ministry he took the road of discretion over valour often. There were times when he instructed his disciples not to tell anyone about him; there were moments when he avoided conflict saying, 'my time has not yet come'. Sometimes, to reach your goal, you need to bypass the narrow road. Of course, there are times when discretion is the better part of valour.

But, eventually there will always come a time when you have to step back on to the narrow way; when you have to stop kicking the can down the road; when you have to stand up for what you believe in; when you have to face down temptation; when you have to live with the consequences of your choices. When the Pharisees said to Jesus, "You should leave this place," Jesus did just that – he left Galilee to go to Jerusalem, but he was not running away, he was stepping up.

Through Jesus, in those Galilean towns and villages God had been active, active: in the wilderness of poverty; in the deserts of ill-health; in the wastelands of powerlessness; in the wildlands of injustice, teaching people that life didn't have to be this way, and miraculously showing them that God did not want it to be this way. With this active God, alive in Jesus Christ, in Galilee, there was a large group of men and women who followed him, supported him, worked with him, and funded his work amongst those most marginalised of people.

But, opposition came his way, as it was sure to do so. If you seek to overturn power structures; if you seek to undermine the privileged place of religion in society; if you call attention to cultural and social injustice, then trouble will come looking for you, and no amount of discretion will allow you to avoid it. If God has chosen to identify with the unloved and the most vulnerable so completely that God has become, in Jesus Christ, himself one of the most vulnerable, then eventually he'll also become one of the most unloved. They will all leave. By the time we reach the crucifixion everyone will have fled from Jesus.

Lent is a time for us to remember that choosing to follow Jesus eventually has consequences: consequences for your life; for the lives of those around you; and consequences for society as a whole. If there are no consequences to this way of life, which in vulnerability and love identifies with the most marginalised, then you're not following, you've fleeing. That is why the season of Lent comes with its traditions of discipline and sacrifice, with giving things up or taking things on. These symbolise our commitment to change the world and our lives: to love, to be vulnerable and to sacrifice, and to live with the consequences of doing so.

There are lessons in Lent that for individuals and nations. You can't keep kicking the can down the road. At some point, for example, the UK Parliament is going to have live with the consequences of the decision it took to hold a Referendum on Britain's EU membership. It can't keep running away from it; the road is becoming narrower and narrower and it will have to take a decision at some point.

The horrific and awful, terrorist attack in Christchurch in New Zealand on Friday is a threat of the sort the Pharisees used – stop doing what you are doing or there will be people who will kill you. There are times when the road along which freedom and democracy travels becomes very narrow and plunges in to very dark valleys, but you can't back down if you want to stay on it; you need to believe that it will rise again out of the darkness and into a new morning.

Lent is the season when we remember that in our world, in our country, and in our personal lives there are times when the world around us becomes fox-like: cunning, predatory, nocturnal. When it does, when the world becomes a fox, God does not become a pack of hounds or a shotgun, instead God becomes like a hen, a mother hen, sheltering you in love beneath its wings, prepared to die to save its chicks. It is frightening, this commitment to sacrificial love; but sacrificial love it is, and if you are brave enough to stay the course, to stay close, to allow yourself to be protected then this God of vulnerable, sacrificial love will sacrifice himself for you.