

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

Today we mark the second Sunday in Lent, and our journey continues. There are more lessons for us to learn and there is further encouragement for us as we are drawn closer to God and reflect on our relationship to God and the divine.

The letter to the Philippians offers some reassurance. With the words “their minds are set on earthly things ... but our citizenship is in heaven”, we are reminded to remain focussed on God and on those things which are uplifting, inspiring and life-giving. This is indeed a Lenten task, and good fuel for our Lenten discipline of reflection and spiritual contemplation.

But this does not mean that we live with rose-tinted glasses or are ignorant to the realities of life. The Gospel passage reminds us that Jesus was no pushover and was willing to stand his ground when it was necessary. When some Pharisees come to him to warn him of Herod’s violent intent, he does not flee. He outright demonstrates that he has higher priorities – the care of those in need – and he will keep working for as long as it takes and as long as he has time to do so. With the words “go and tell that fox from me” Jesus makes it clear that he does not fear Herod and will only leave when his work is done. From this we learn that Jesus remained focussed on caring for those in need, and that he will not be dissuaded from his task by some earthly potentate.

So often we have a kindly and benign image of Jesus, and to a certain extent we should, because he is a figure of love and compassion. Yet Jesus’ love was such that he could be fierce when needed. He would criticize those who needed to be called to account, and was willing to exercise tough love in the advice he gave and what he did. He did all this as a reflection of God’s love for humanity.

Love is an incredibly complex emotion – yes, it calls for us to be generous and forgiving and to overlook the mistakes of others (and to hope that our own mistakes will be so mercifully treated), but love also calls for us to be honest about consequences of actions and that they also have repercussions. Jesus models this for us, and we can learn much from him.

Jesus then starts speaking about Jerusalem, in a passage known as the ‘lament over Jerusalem’. He says, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” He is speaking of the past, but also of the future. He knows that Jerusalem will be his final destination, and that it is the place where he will die.

He will not be stoned, but he will face public abuse and humiliation similar to a stoning. He will be rejected and despised. But not immediately. He also knows that he will enter the city in triumph, to shouts of 'Hosanna' while palm branches are waved in joy and celebration. He knows the weight of expectation that crowd will place on his shoulders, and he also knows that he will meet and even exceed those expectations, but not in the way the people anticipate.

As an illustration of the depth of his love for all humanity, Jesus then uses the wonderful image of the mother hen gathering her chicks under her protective wings. It is an image that inspires a vision of safety, of warmth and shelter, as well as comfort. If you have ever seen a mother hen call her chicks to her, and to open her wings that they can hide themselves and be protected as they rush to their mother, you know what Jesus means.

Jesus expresses his longing to be such a carer for the people of Jerusalem, by which we can interpret his compassion for all people and to bring them back to God and God's love. But Jesus acknowledges that they were not receptive to his call. "You were not willing", he says. But that doesn't mean he's going to stop trying. That's the extraordinary depth of Jesus' love and empathy. He is not deterred; he is resolute. At the end of his words, he still shows that strength and determination that made him call Herod "that fox".

On this second Sunday in Lent, let us pray that we will be resilient in our faith, that we will be bold in what we do in order to show the love and grace of God, and continue in the service of God and of God's people. May Jesus be our guide and inspiration in this journey, and prosper the work of our hands and hearts.

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