

St Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Second Sunday in Lent, year 'C'
13 March, 2022
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

Jesus calls Herod a fox in this morning's gospel—an animal which is traditionally thought to be wily and devious. The historical record certainly records Herod as a wily and devious schemer who was contemptibly lacking in moral courage. After the death of his father Herod the Great (who was actually a pretender to the Judean throne kept in power by the might of the Imperial Roman machine) the Kingdom of Judea was divided into four sections and Herod's three sons and his sister were each given responsibility for one of the sections. The younger Herod's quarter-section included Galilee. Of course he, like his father, was a client king of the Roman empire and totally subservient to its will. In other words, he was a Jewish collaborator with an oppressive, occupying regime—like Marshall Pétain of Vichy, France, the ultimate craven politician.

Herod's first appearance in Luke's gospel comes back in chapter nine where we're told he was perplexed. He'd already beheaded the troublesome John the Baptist, so who was this new prophet he was hearing about? In this morning's gospel, Jesus is journeying through Galilee toward Jerusalem, the centre of power. Some Pharisees tell Jesus he'd better watch out because Herod wants to kill him. But Jesus knows this and he has Herod's number and Herod doesn't scare him. No cunning or threats from that fox can make him stop doing what he's doing. And anyway, it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.

That's a curious thing to say. You'd think that of all places Jerusalem would be the one where prophets were listened to and honoured. It was the Holy City, the centre of Israel's religious life. Yet it was never very welcoming to prophets. They always lived on the outside, in the wilderness—both real and symbolic—and on the edge.

And the reason Jerusalem was hostile to prophets is because it had become a place for the establishment, for those who lived in comfort and had the inside track. Instead of being a place of righteousness and justice, it was a place of corruption and exploitation, and those who dared to call out the urban elites weren't around for long.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

Contrary to popular belief, being prophetic has nothing to do with predicting the future. It has to do with speaking truth to power which has always been a costly business. We've seen plenty of examples since the conflict in Ukraine began in which ordinary people are courageously resisting the Russian army—and against great odds. There was a fascinating article on this subject in *Forbes* magazine last week. In it, the author wrote:

Courage wears many faces. Few resemble acts of heroism in war zones. More often courage shows up as quiet acts of personal bravery—in our work, our leadership and our lives. All require us to lay our vulnerability on the line for a nobler cause.

So forgive me for repeating what I've said before: the Christian life takes courage. It isn't meant to be lived quietly in private. It's meant to be lived boldly in the public square. Like our Lord, we too are called to prophetic mission, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and to speak out when we encounter injustice and intolerance in all its forms because, as William Sloane Coffin once said, the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

Sadly it seems that in the echo chamber of the Internet, truth is so often the first causality. But the Internet is also a remarkably powerful tool which can hold up a remorseless mirror to corruption and power. Which is why Putin and his authoritarian cronies want to limit access to social media.

You and I have a solemn duty to speak out against the craven who seek to spread misinformation like a contagion. Yet so often we don't because we don't want to get into it, don't want to lose friends, don't want to rock the boat. I certainly don't, especially where my priestly ministry is concerned, largely because I'm afraid of alienating people, of losing members, of being thought of as too political. But the Gospel isn't a political manifesto. It's simply the Gospel. And the values of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, being merciful to those who differ from us, and breaking down the barriers of class and race that divide us, aren't "left wing" values. They are simply Christian values. So preaching about these values shouldn't be a cause for fear, nor should hearing about them be cause for the kind of fear which manifests itself in anger.

Let's not forget the words of the psalmist who says,

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear?
the Lord is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?*

We need to hang on to those words, especially since there are lots of voices out there that tell us to be afraid, that *want* us to be afraid so that we might become agents of hatred. But there is another voice that speaks to us, the voice of the One who trusted in God completely and who tells us the best thing to do in the face of fear is to love. Though the voice of fear is powerful, the voice of love is irresistible. And perfect love casts out fear.

Christina Rossetti captures this sentiment perfectly in the first stanza of her poem "The Key":

Love is the key of life and death
Of hidden heavenly mystery;
Of all Christ is, of all he saith,
Love is the key.

Today, once again, the sacred and urgent task of being Jesus' loving presence in the world is set before us. We mustn't shrink from it. The craven and cunning foxes guarding the henhouse may have wormed their way into people's hearts and minds through fear, but they are cowards. We know that they are outfoxed by the gospel message of love. Of course, it takes great courage to love and to speak the truth in love, especially since the truth is not what the powers want to hear. But the truth will also set us free. Free to love our neighbours as ourselves. Free to renounce the evil powers of the world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. Free to go with Christ even into Jerusalem and to the cross by which we are freed from even the greatest fear of all: the fear of death.