

Lent 2

A common human, even institutional, perhaps even national experience is that other people, groups, nations do not understand you; they think differently to what you think; and are at best indifferent to what you say and do. Sometimes this is totally understandable. At the moment the church, the church in all its different shapes and hues, does not have a leg to stand on when it comes to our response to child sexual abuse. One can sort of understand why people may look askance at us and our message. However, that aside – our modern world, even at the best of times, still does not understand us and rejects us. So, what do we do when people disagree with us, don't accept our point of view – about life, and even about matters of the heart and of faith?

Jesus, and many people before him, had had this experience with Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders and authorities. In our gospel reading (though he was at the time not actually in Jerusalem, but touring around Galilee) observes, perhaps more correctly, laments:

“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!**”

This cuts to the core the awkward relationship Jesus had with his Jewish faith and his Jewish compatriots and those who did not understand him. Why do you all not listen and follow?

As Jesus indicates the prophets before him also suffered. We think for example of Jeremiah who stood up to the king and for this paid a price. In Jeremiah 38 we read, “Then the officials said to the king, “this man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in the city (Jerusalem was being besieged by Babylon at the time) the king acquiesced, and the attendants to the king, threw him into a cistern, a deep well.”

The people had always, it would seem, rejected the prophets' call to turn back to Yahweh and the covenant they had made with God. Now Jesus' message was not quite the same as the prophets – but the reaction was the same. And today people still will reject Jesus, and the Christian faith; not violently as happened in the time of Jeremiah, but with indifference and the claim of irrelevance or mild bemusement. What are we to do?

Well an obvious starting point is with that wonderful image of a hen gathering her brood under wings. We still are to extend love to all. As Jesus also said, the rain falls on the just and the unjust – our neighbours may be for us or against us; but they are still our neighbours and we should love them. And that may seem to be the end of the sermon - we need to show love – be like that mother hen, just as God extends his love and grace to us even if we don't understand. However, our short passage from Luke is not as simple as that: it is complex and ironic, and perhaps instructive for us.

I began with the question what do we do when we experience rejection? Well the irony is, that in this reading Jesus rejects, even aggressively and rudely rejects, advice given to him about his own safety. Remember the scene began up in Galilee on his teaching and healing mission. Some Pharisees came and said to him – that's right Pharisees - “Get away from here, Herod wants to kill you.” (Lk 13:31) Now that's a turn up for the books – Pharisees wanting to do Jesus a good turn. After all their criticism and wanting to trap him, they now want to help him. Perhaps they knew Jesus was no fan of Herod, nor were they: so, ‘an enemy of my enemy is my friend’, could have been

their thinking. (Now we also need to note this is not Herod the Great – who rebuilt the temple and who was the king of the whole of the Roman province, but his son who ruled for the Romans in the region of Galilee, and was the one who beheaded John the Baptist. A significant but not the major political player in the province.) Jesus replies to their back of the hand suggestion to get away from there with:

“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 will finish my work.’”

Here Jesus gives a brief description as to what he is on about – and he is clearly alluding to what will happen to him down in Jerusalem with that phrase “on the third day”. He will be killed on and on the third day he will be raised from death. And if that is not enough – even more explicitly than these coded words - he adds

“Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

Yes he was going to be killed. But to Herod, to the Pharisees, he is indicating any threats that you may make towards me do not frighten me. You need actually to understand – yes there is the good work I am doing here like healing people, and why would you want to stop me doing that? Just know Herod, you old fox, that it will not be in some regional fiefdom that you rule things will come to a head, but it will be down where the Roman Empire and the religious authorities rule: Jerusalem. I will address all that Jerusalem symbolises and not just contend with you, a petty tyrant.

I actually feel a bit sorry for the Pharisees at this point. They are most probably shrugging their shoulders and saying, at least thinking – we were only trying to help and warn you that Herod (who might not be all powerful, but is still is a nasty piece of work) was at the moment on a murderous war path, and you should get out of here. That’s all. They were not expecting the dismissive reply Jesus actually offers them and Herod.

Well-meaning advice is rejected. Why? Does this add a gloss to our usual understanding that we are to be like that mother hen and love all even if they reject us? But what is that gloss or qualification from this confusing little passage?

I think we need to hear the whole of Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem. He goes on

“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.’” (Lk 13:35)

The key in this lament of Jesus is this short sentence: **See your house is left to you.** Or see your house is forsaken. Or as Matthew adds desolate. ‘See your house is left to you and desolate.’ (Matt 23:38) The house would seem to be indeed the temple; the very symbol of Jewish faith. Jesus is saying on the one hand you have rejected the prophets, and by implication himself – but on the other you will still have the temple. But note (and this will be known to the hearers of the gospel) that temple will be soon destroyed. (Our gospel writers are perhaps getting ahead of themselves, but it is certainly the case that come the early 70’s, a generation after Jesus, and before this gospel is written, the Romans do indeed destroy the Jerusalem temple.)

I think Jesus is saying there is a choice here. A choice between myself, my way, my understanding of God and God's message, or as he says of himself in quoting from scripture: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord", **and** the place of the temple, the traditions and the culture associated with religious practice. Yes, the folk of Jerusalem can choose – and of course I will still love them (the mother hen image); but the choice is between me or their house . . . which for the readers of this gospel will know, has not lasted, and is destroyed. His lament is that Jerusalem has not gone after deeper things, but has chosen what they can see, the structures, the familiar, the concrete, if you like the way of the Pharisees. But those things will not last. They will pass away, and be destroyed.

So when the Pharisees, that group ever concerned about keeping up appearances (particularly with regard to the observance of the Jewish law) express their concern about Jesus - Jesus reads their warning as being merely concerned about his safety, his physical well-being. The Pharisees do not understand his message about the need for a new relationship with God for which he has come. In fact, Jesus ironically uses their concern over his personal safety, to indicate, with some very broad hints – especially for those who know the whole story – that his willingness to risk his personal safety, indeed his life, seals, indeed creates the foundation of that new relationship with God.

Jesus rejects the Pharisees well-meaning advice, because he knows there is another way of interpreting and understanding his mission. The concern is more than 'keep the leader alive at all costs'. Rather the concern is that through his death there will be a new relationship with God. Jerusalem and the temple, as tangible symbols of one's faith, are just not going to last, or sustain any relationship with God. Jerusalem just doesn't understand that what it puts its hope and trust in will turn to ashes. And Jesus is left lamenting. They don't understand he will die. What more can he do?

Christ's experience, is our experience too when we see spiritual and deep matters of belief dismissed. Our contemporary world is dominated by the need for signs and tangible proof. In our instance, trust is not in a glorious house of God, the Jerusalem temple – but wealth, fame, power and success. And we perhaps want these things too – and we may even want them for the church. However, will not that one day our very contemporary 'human constructs' be desolate, as happened in Jerusalem? There is a deeper, spiritual dimension about life, we have to believe in. This was the way of Christ; his way even until death on the cross. We say it in our communion services, but do we understand: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord". Focusing on the things of the world, can be easier than a person who comes in the name of the Lord. Sometimes people not understanding actually confirms a deeper truth about our faith and what is ultimately important.

At Lent, indeed at all times, it is good to reflect on how Jesus did in fact **not** avoid a difficult path, the threats from the Herod's of the world; rather faithfully he saw a new relationship with God was needed through his own suffering and the cross. Again, sometimes people not understanding actually confirms a deeper truth about our faith and what is ultimately important. Fortunately, God like a hen and her chicks, still sits in the background, brooding, offering love for all.