

[Luke 13:31-35](#)

It's very common in our road to see foxes. Mainly we see them of an evening, but it's not unusual to see them brazenly strutting around in the daytime.

They are of course on the lookout for food, and this means we have to take extra precautions with putting out our food waste bins on 'bin night'. It isn't enough to lock the bin by pulling the handle forwards, because the foxes use their noses to flip the handle back and they can then open the bins, find food, and leave a mess. I know: I've twice had to clear up afterwards.

Instead, not only do we pull the handle forwards, we put the food bin on top of the regular black waste bin or blue recycling bin. The refuse collectors don't like us doing that, because they have to move the food bin to empty the main bin, but it's the only way to stop the foxes.

Thankfully, we aren't a household that keeps chickens, or we would have much bigger problems to solve with the foxes.

Which brings us neatly to today's passage, where Jesus describes Herod Antipas as a fox and compares himself to a hen. Is that relevant today when we see the actions of a vicious fox, Vladimir Putin, on the world stage? Perhaps. Let's think about Herod the fox and Jesus the hen. And let's ask what these images mean for our life and faith today.

Herod the fox

I think we need to remember the context. Although last week for the first Sunday in Lent preachers will have jumped back to Luke 4 and the temptations in the wilderness before Jesus' public ministry began, we have to remember that before that we were part-way through that ministry in our readings. We had reached the Transfiguration, where Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah about his departure which he was going to accomplish at Jerusalem – that is, his death and resurrection.

By now, Jesus has told his disciples that he is going to suffer and die at the hands of the establishment in Jerusalem, he has tapped a Jerusalem postcode into his sat-nav, and that's where he's heading. He's on his way to betrayal, torture, Calvary, and a temporary stay in a tomb.

The Pharisees who come and speak to him are concerned for him. (Yes, there are well-intentioned Pharisees in the Bible.) But their reading of the politics is that Jesus won't even make it to Jerusalem. Herod will get him before then.

‘Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.’
(Verse 31b)

Jesus, make your escape, they say. They know what Herod is like.

So how does he respond?

³² He replied, ‘Go and tell that fox, “I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.” ³³ In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day – for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!’

In calling Herod a fox he is not referring to the man’s cunning or intelligence but to his ‘malicious destructiveness’¹. To Jesus, Herod is

a varmint in the Lord’s field, a murderer of God’s agents, a would-be disrupter of the divine economy²

Herod the fox murders God’s people, says Jesus. After all, he had cowardly agreed to the murder of Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist. He had a track record.

So shouldn’t Jesus get out of that territory? Well, he does move on, but not because he’s scared of Herod. He does so because he knows his destiny is to complete his work not on Herod’s turf but in Jerusalem. No prophet can die outside Jerusalem.

Jesus isn’t scared by Herod, but that doesn’t mean he won’t suffer. In the face of fear, Jesus sticks resolutely to his God-given task. He doesn’t compromise, he doesn’t back down, he doesn’t run away, he says, this is my purpose and no Herod in this world is going to knock me off course. And by staying on course he brings about the salvation of the world.

What are the things that might scare us off course as Christians? Is it mockery by our friends? Is it changes in the law of the land? Is it the church adopting a policy on something that deeply upsets our conscience?

Whatever it is, it’s time to rebuke the fox and keep going. It may be costly to do so, but God has called us to be disciples of Jesus and imitate his Son. But the example of his Son says that when we stay the course, however difficult it may be at times, the results are measured in blessings.

Jesus the hen

So who will rise to this task? Jesus issues a challenge to Jerusalem ahead of his arrival there, but how hopeful is he of a positive response?

³⁴ 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁵ Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."'

It doesn't sound very promising, does it? The very people who longed for the Messiah have either not recognised him or they have rejected him, and so they are not gathered under his protective care. How dreadful their future will be.

It is no good soft-soaping this. It is no good pretending that everyone will make it into the kingdom of God. God loves all people but not everybody responds to that love, and thus they find themselves outside, in a desolate house to use Jesus' image here, instead of under the caring love of God in Christ.

You see, the question isn't what religion we are. It isn't what nationality we are. It's about whether we say yes to walking with Jesus.

So is there no hope for the Jews? Is this one of those passages that anti-Semitic racists can use against the Jews? I think of the Jewish lady I worked with in an office, who told me one day how when she was a child other children called her a 'Christ killer.' What a miracle that years later my friend Doreen found God's love in Christ for herself.

Yet there is a hint in what Jesus says that God has not finished with them. If there were no hope, Jesus could just have ended with the words, 'Look, your house is left to you desolate.' But he doesn't quite. His final words here are,

I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

There is always a hope of acknowledging Jesus. People who have once said 'no' to him can still be drawn back to him at a later date by the Holy Spirit and bow the knee to their Lord, saying 'yes' to him.

Could that be one of us? Have we relied on our religious upbringing or our regular attendance at church without ever having said 'yes' to Jesus? Have we never known the security of his saving love?

Or is it that there is someone dear to us who up until now has either consciously rejected Jesus or alternatively simply been completely apathetic about him? Who are those people we long to discover the love of God in Christ? A family member? A dear friend? Someone we've been praying for over a long period of time but where we have been tempted to give up? Let's renew our prayers for them. It is still possible they will see the beauty and glory of Jesus and say 'yes' to him.

Conclusion

We're only in this position of being able to say 'yes' to Jesus or pray that others do because Jesus didn't allow Herod to knock him off course. He went through with his calling, costly as it was for him to do so.

So let's make sure we don't waste the opportunity – either by making our own response to Jesus or by continuing in prayer for others to do so.

¹ Ian Paul, [*Who is included in and excluded from the kingdom in Luke 13?*](#)

² Darr, *Character Building*, cited by Joel Green in *Luke NICNT* p536 and quoted by Paul, *op. cit.*