

Geoff's sermon from Lent 2

Philippians 3 – 4 (NIV)

¹⁷Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. ¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. ¹Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

Luke 13 (NIV)

³¹At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." ³²He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' ³³In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!

³⁴"O 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, but you were not willing! ³⁵Look, 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!'"

The night we learned Bruno may have to be put to sleep, as Joan and I hugged and sobbed together, Bruno let out a shriek of distress in a tone we'd never heard from him before, and despite whatever pain in that cancer-riddled hind leg, he jumped up - and if he could have hugged us both at that moment he would have done. As it was - he pushed his front paws into my back as if to reassure me that everything would be okay - in the end.

And he was right, the next day Bruno was out of his pain, and last Tuesday - exactly 40 days later, we met his successor, Shadow, a, 18 month old black retriever-cross-collie, and I'm quite sure Bruno would be delighted to know that just like him 8 years ago, Shadow has found a loving home.

Now before you start thinking the vicar's gone soft in the head and lost the plot completely, you may be interested to know that at a conference on wellbeing this week in Wells, a surprising number of clergy agreed that the best stress-buster of all is a long walk with the dog - and as I wrote in last month's parish magazine, when it comes to unconditional love, we can learn a great deal from our furry friends, especially when it comes to protecting and caring for one another.

Animals go to extraordinary lengths to protect their young, and often their boundaries of care & concern go even beyond their own species. I read somewhere that only two

animals kill for fun - foxes and human beings - and one of Basil Brush's favourite quarries is chickens, I don't think it's any coincidence that Jesus mentions both foxes and hens virtually in the same breath here. So, bearing in mind the way Jesus used metaphor, let's take a look for parallels - firstly between Herod and foxes.

Foxes are highly intelligent and extremely sly animals. They have the art of camouflage off to a tee. They can double back on their tracks, climb trees and cross rivers to put the pursuing hounds off their scent. Herod managed to shake off his critics by being two-faced, siding with the Romans, at the cost of his own people (if indeed he ever regarded them as his own).

Foxes confuse their prey - by dancing playfully nearby whilst inching closer and closer until they're within striking distance. Herod was a confidence trickster, kidding his subjects with false diplomacy then striking rapidly, throwing all objectors into prison.

Foxes are highly adaptive and can find their way into the chicken coup a lot quicker than a hen can find her way out. Herod gained his kingship by hiding behind his even less popular thug of a brother and he managed to hold on to his power by wheedling his way into high places by threat or favour.

Now we know Herod was a highly unpopular king, what comforts me is that Jesus knew that too - lesson one this morning - our God sees through everyone. You can't fool God. He knows everything. He sees everything. He records everything that's ever committed against us. BUT - let this also be a warning - He sees through us too! Lesson one - You can't fool God

And lesson two - Jesus wasn't afraid of Herod, or the Pharisees - or anyone else! He knew for sure whatever He said about Herod would eventually backfire on Him especially when He said it to the Pharisees. Their false concern for His safety certainly didn't fool Him. Lesson three - like I said last week - He who leads you into the desert isn't necessarily your enemy and he who offers you help isn't necessarily your friend! Jesus knew what they were capable of doing to Him. He was fully aware of His final destiny, but He was not deterred. And lesson four - how many times have I said this - GOD LOVES YOU - SOOOO MUCH!!! He's not going to allow trivialities like death or fear get in His way!

You can almost hear His despair here, as Jesus cries out for the state and the fate of Jerusalem, as He sees God's own people once again on a path of self-destruction. There are huge parallels this morning between Jesus' cry for Jerusalem and Paul's anguish for the Philippians.

*¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now say again **even with tears**, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things*

Question one this morning - where is your mind this Lent? Is it on earthly things? Are you thinking - even now - of your Sunday lunch or what's on telly this evening?

Jesus cries "how often I have **longed** to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings".

(Now I'll let you into a little secret here, that in every church I've served so far

I've quickly identified the mother hen. There's always one - in every church
And no - I have no intention of naming her here! But that's not what Jesus was
alluding to.)

As I said before, animals go to extreme lengths to protect their young, and in the
case of a barn fire (which is all too commonplace in farming) it has been known for
the mother hen to gather up her chicks under her wings to protect them from the
blazing inferno. Indeed, in one case, in a farm in Northern Ireland, having finally put
out the flames, firemen ventured into the charred, burned out shell where the barn
once stood, only to find one very dead mother hen, but out from under her frazzled
wing crawled three unburned and healthy chicks.

I have no doubt what Jesus meant when He said "on the third day I will reach my
goal" and in the very next breath "no prophet can die outside Jerusalem". Jesus
makes it clear, that God's mother hen is about to face her fearsome fox - head on
and is to die for her chicks. But unlike that poor mother-hen in Ireland, three days
later This Good Shepherd will rise victorious to lead and to carry His wayward flock all
the way home.

As one beautiful black German Shepherd once tried to tell me "don't worry -
everything will be okay - in the end".