

Sermon 13^h March 2022
Year 2 C - Complexities
Delivered by Rev'd Michele Knight

O Lord, gather us in together and show us truly who you are and who the world is. Open our hearts and minds to all the complexities of your Word, your world, and your people. We pray these things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I was telling someone this week, that one of the most important things I have learned in my life is that you never really know what is happening, or has happened, in the lives of other people. Most of us are a lot more complex than others think we are. We are neither the waste of space that our opponents claim, nor the extremely virtuous people that some of our friends might like to imagine.

There are some observers of life who boast that they can sum up a person in a few minutes. I have undertaken many studies that claim to be able to work out people's personalities and categorise them into neat little groups or boxes. Although some of these are useful in that they can help us to look below the surface of both other and ourselves, I don't really think we can ever truly understand another person, maybe not even those closest to us. We are complex creatures; not easily classified and labelled; and not should we be.

Jesus shared our complexity and developed depths and heights of his own. His contemporaries were baffled by him. After 2,000 years of Christian discipleship, devotion, prayer, preaching, and endless writing of books, we still fall short in our understanding. We have embellished him or undersold him, clung vehemently to the things we like about him or turned our backs on aspects of Jesus which we don't want to know. From today's reading from Luke, I hope to underline two facets of this remarkable, complex Jesus of Nazareth. Both are firmly based, not in the biases of the diverse modern Christian church, but in the Gospels.

In this short 5 verse piece in Luke we see a picture of "The Tough Jesus" set alongside of "The Compassionate Jesus"

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. He still has a lot to teach his disciples, but the path of his earthly ministry has now shifted to its final destination in Jerusalem. Some Pharisees came to Him with a warning: "Herod is looking for you. You had better get out." This was the same Herod who ordered John the Baptist's head lopped. He is clearly a tyrant not to be toyed with.

He was a son of the notorious "Herod the Great", the killer of the infants at Bethlehem. Like his father he was cruel and ambitious. He ruled, on behalf of Rome, the region around Galilee. His marriage to the insidious Herodias, made his reign even more notorious. We don't know whether the Pharisees who came with the warning were friendly or hostile. Maybe they came to Jesus with the best of intentions, or maybe they were Herod's stooges, trying to scare Jesus away.

The response of Jesus was tough and direct: "You go and tell that fox, Herod, that I will continue to do my thing today and tomorrow, and on the third day I'll complete what I've started."

Now that is a tough response to a tyrant. “That fox” - not exactly an answer Herod would hear kindly. Jesus was a strong person, resilient in character, hard as nails when the occasion called for it.

This Jesus is no sentimental dreamer. Jesus knew the score. He mourned the bloody death of His cousin John. But he was not going to be intimidated. He was a man in charge of his own destiny. A tough Jesus.

“Go tell that fox I will move on when I am ready. Not before.”

Placed beside this picture of Jesus, is another scene depicting Jesus as the compassionate Christ. A graphic contradiction in understanding the very complex nature of Jesus. Luke shows Jesus lamenting over the fate Jerusalem. The image that our Gospel gives us in the later verses of today's Gospel is that of Jesus as a mother hen.

Compared to other metaphors of God in the Bible — shepherd, potter, bread of life, and father, the hen is quite different. There is something very ordinary – and yet profound – about a mother hen. Once a hen hatches her eggs, her priority shifts from self-preservation to protecting her babies. She goes from an individual mindset to a communal one. Themes of protection and safety are all over this metaphor.

Jerusalem was the spiritual and political capital of the Jewish people. You and I can never appreciate the depth of feeling a Jew like Jesus had for Jerusalem. Idealised as the city of God, Jerusalem was woven into their prayers and conversation, into their hopes and their worst fears. No earthly place was more precious to Jesus the Jew.

But it rejected him, rejected his compassion, and in the end, would hound him outside its walls to a rocky hill called “The Skull”.

Luke shows us Jesus lamenting at the coming destruction. Jerusalem had been destroyed before, hundreds of years before in the time of the prophets. The city had been reduced to rubble, the holy temple vessels taken off to a foreign palace to be used in drunken orgies. The ruins had become a desolation, a nesting place for owls and a lair for wolves.

It was to be destroyed again. Remember that Luke was writing after Roman patience had run out. In 70 AD the holy city was besieged starved and conquered, its people slaughtered, crucified and scattered.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem.....How often I wanted to gather your children like a hen gathering her chickens under her wing, but you would not have it.

The heart of Jesus was almost broken. Compassion; profound human compassion, elemental divine compassion!

Here you have it. Jesus the tough character who would not give an inch to the bullying of Herod, is also Jesus the compassionate person. He is the man who longed to mother the lost people of Jerusalem, and who would at the last willingly give his life “as a ransom for many”. A complex character indeed.

These days, there is no shortage of material when it comes to complex, difficult news and people. We constantly hear news of the ongoing pandemic, and the conflicting opinions on vaccinations, the need for lockdowns, isolation and even the severity of Covid is hotly debated by people for very complex reasons. Some of them 'toughing' it out while others are seeking to look to gather people under their wings like a mother hen. There is news of violence, oppression, and communities pitted against one another, internationally, nationally and locally. There is constantly news of death and loss.

But we can find hope within this complex and divisive world. The words in Psalm 27 today bring us comfort, assurance and encouragement. They say, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?" and "though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in him." These words are about trusting God and not being afraid. The irony is that among all the difficult news we have been bombarded with, it has been really easy to be afraid. Is it that we lack faith if we are afraid? Is fear a sign that we are not trusting God enough?

Elsewhere in scripture, God commands us to not be afraid. Perhaps these reminders to not be afraid are not to shame us when we are, but to recognize that, just like us, people in the Bible were also complex and had moments when they were afraid. They longed to be comforted too. God is with us not just in our grand declarations of faith, but also when we are afraid. This psalm, for good reason, is a favorite. It is a psalm of comfort.

This Lenten season is a perfect time to try to look beyond what seem to be the obvious to the more complex, both within our secular world and people as in a more spiritual sense. It is the perfect time to seek, as Psalm 27 says, the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. The Season of Lent does not shy away from the tougher, more complex things of this life. We are reminded of the deeper understanding of our faith and of our own mortality, we are also reminded of the life we have yet to live.

The goodness of the Lord is always present, even in times of great trouble. I see this juxtaposition in the Luke reading about the fox and the brooding hen. God is in all of life, its ups and its downs, in all of its complexities and perhaps especially in times of great trouble. The psalmist asks, "What if I had not believed that I should see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living?" How different our lives would be if we did not believe in that goodness! The implication of this is that if we believe that we will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, then we'll look for it. We will look for the goodness beneath the complexities and difficulties we see in the world and the people around us. That goodness is not just at the end of days when God makes all things right, but in the present moment, too. It's all around us if we only slow down and pay attention, if we take the time to look below the surface of the complex people we meet, work with and love

The invitation this Lent is to carry the image of Jesus as a mother hen with us every day. This does not ignore the realities of the dangers up ahead, or the difficulties in dealing with the people around us, but it does give us something to hold onto when we are afraid. How we long to be gathered under those wings! Much like those comforting words from Psalm 27, knowing that God is with us at every twist and turn can make a world of a difference — even and especially in these difficult times.

There is power in the loving care of God. Amen.