

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH LENT 2 YEAR C 17 MARCH 2018

How should Christians relate to society? That's a huge question. You could approach it from an individual's point of view – be a responsible citizen, do good, use your vote wisely and so on. You could also approach it from the whole church aspect – the church is an important group within society. In this country the Church of England is an established church, subject to laws that don't necessarily apply to other denominations and religious groups. Correspondingly, we have various privileges, including seats for Bishops in the House of Lords. The church can speak and act as a body. Sometimes it does; sometimes, alas, a part of the church claims to speak for the whole.

Some people and religious movements try to withdraw from society. Not Jesus in today's gospel: a very interesting passage featuring a fox and a hen as images. The long middle section of Luke's gospel describes the journey Jesus made from Galilee in the north of the holy land to Jerusalem in the south where he would be crucified. En route he has many encounters and tells many parables. Here he is warned by some Pharisees that Herod wants to kill him. These Pharisees seem to be on Jesus' side – it's good to have a correction to the bad press they usually get in the gospels. Herod, sometimes called Herod Antipas, is the son of Herod the Great who tried to kill the infant Jesus. Neither Herod was actually a king. The Roman occupying power allowed them to be governors of the Jewish population in the northern part of Israel; sometimes they're called tetrarchs, governors of one of four divisions of the country.

From the New Testament and elsewhere we know that Herod was a weak and immoral ruler. Jesus calls him 'that fox' – an expression for a person of little worth. Jesus would continue with his work irrespective of the threats. 'Today and tomorrow' is an idiom meaning 'for the time being'. His work would be finished at Jerusalem, and when he refers to the 'third day', we are reminded of his resurrection.

Jerusalem was outside Herod's jurisdiction. Having mentioned Jerusalem, Jesus laments its failure to respond to prophets in the past and to himself in the present. As the capital, it represents the whole people of Israel, chosen and called by God. Jesus expresses his longing that Jerusalem would accept the salvation he offers: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings... ." It's a maternal image of love. Jesus goes on, "...and you were not willing." We know how things worked out, and the Jewish authorities conspired with the Roman administration to put Jesus to death. "Your house is left to you," declares Jesus, echoing

words spoken six hundred years previously by the prophet Jeremiah when his message was unheeded. God's salvation is rejected by human intransigence.

So Jesus refused to be silenced by pressure from his society. Yet he felt a love for that society which ultimately rejected him and his message. He did not love its ways; he wished it would turn to God, repent.

Our Parochial Church Council has been discussing, in its two meetings so far this year, how St. John's can be a missionary church. How can we enable people to hear the Christian gospel, the good news? Taking our cue from Jesus, there will be times when we have to go against the prevailing climate in society. Religion is either marginalised, seen as irrelevant by most people, or religion is seen as the preserve of fanatics and fundamentalists. We should make no secret of belonging to a worshipping Christian community, and letting it be known that our faith helps make sense of our lives; admitting too that we haven't got everything neatly worked out. Not all of us can or should give detailed explanations of the faith, but we can invite people to come and see. We hope they will find a community where reconciliation and diversity are valued, in a society which is divided over many issues, and where differences between people are seen as reasons for keeping them apart.

The other cue we take from Jesus is about our motivation for mission. It should not be keeping church going: filling up the pews and paying the bills. Purely and simply it should be love for those who need to find the truth that is in Christ, even those who seem to be rejecting the offer of salvation. Do we love our neighbours that much? We may experience rejection ourselves. Some of it may be valid – the church is not perfect in keeping its own teaching – but it will be as nothing compared to the suffering of Christ, which became the source of salvation for all who will hear and see.