

Year C Lent Two Luke 13 31 to 35

Mohandas Gandhi once remarked, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.”

As we listen to Jesus first condemn Jerusalem as the place where prophets are murdered or badly bruised with stones and then next express his love and compassion for Jerusalem as a mother hen sheltering her chicks beneath her wings, we hear Gandhi’s words ringing in our ears, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.” What is the connection? Let’s find out...

Jerusalem is Jesus’ co-star in this particular Gospel episode. Jesus has resolutely turned his face toward Jerusalem, Luke has told us. Jesus is on his way to his death and clearly lets us know today that this is all part of his mission. He must go to Jerusalem. He must die.

Our story begins with some pharisees who warn Jesus that Herod is going to kill him. They don’t give us any reason for this. We don’t need to hear a reason. What we need to hear is Jesus being urgently warned to high-tail it out of there to save his neck and Jesus emphatically saying “No.” Jesus instructs the pharisees to tell that fox, Herod, that he’s not going anywhere...he’s on a mission. Both Greek and Jewish literature depicted foxes as crafty, sinister creatures so Jesus was hurling a pretty significant insult at this worldly ruler in his fine palace in Jerusalem while at the same time telling Herod he really doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. Herod is the puppet king of the Roman Empire. Jesus is doing the work of the true king of all things in heaven and on earth.

Jesus tells the pharisees to let Herod know that he is casting out demons and performing cures on his way to Jerusalem. Twice Jesus mentions a three-day timeframe for these things, “today, tomorrow, and the next day.” This drives home the reality of Jesus’ continuing mission for God and Herod’s unimportance in this

mission. Jesus says that his work will be finished on the third day – clearly a reference to his resurrection. In order to be resurrected, Jesus must die. But Jesus' death will have nothing to do with the threat of Herod. Rather, his death is the completion of his present ministry – his ministry of “casting out demons and performing cures” (verse 32). Both of these things are very important:

Luke has earlier told us the significance of Jesus casting out demons when Jesus had been accused of doing so in the name of the devil. Jesus responds to this accusation saying, “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (11:20). Casting out demons is part of Jesus' ongoing battle with the devil throughout the Gospel and is therefore a big part of his mission – his mission to bring the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven.

Curing people is also a significant part of Jesus' mission to bring the kingdom. As I have said before, Jesus' healing miracles are not simply just an indication of God's power. These healings are the inbreaking of God's kingdom on earth. The perfection brought about by the miracles is the perfection that the whole earth will eventually experience at the full revelation of the kingdom. Jesus laid out this road map of perfection in his hometown synagogue when he told his friends and family that he was the one sent to bring this about – he was going to bring God's kingdom through giving release to the captives and sight to the blind.

In order to let Herod, and us, know in no uncertain terms that worldly leaders like Herod have no bearing on his mission, Jesus adds that he *is* going to do these things, revealing God's kingdom, today and tomorrow – your threat means nothing to me, he says.

Jesus is heading toward his death in Jerusalem in spite of the danger spelled out by Herod because his death is not an end to his mission. His death is a continuation of his mission. Casting out demons, healing all who come to be healed, dying on the cross...these are all about establishing the kingdom of God. Today, tomorrow, and “finished” on the third day. The things being finished are Jesus’ works of God’s kingdom. Herod may be a clever fox but he is only a fox...God is in charge.

Jesus’ work of the kingdom will not be undone by death. Rather, it will be completed by his death and resurrection. And, according to Jesus, this must take place in Jerusalem. Why?

Well over a third of Luke’s Gospel is Jesus’ journey toward Jerusalem and then the final events of his life that take place once he arrives there. Jesus’ mention of his death in Jerusalem leads him to reflect on the tragedy that Jerusalem had been in Israel’s past and will be in Jesus’ future, even though its role is a necessary one – “it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem” he tells us.

Jerusalem is the dwelling place chosen by God. It is there that the people draw near to him and worship him and follow his ways. Well, that’s what Jerusalem was supposed to be. But this hub of perfection of life in God’s kingdom had become corrupted by the ways of the world. Many religious leaders desired the praise and admiration of the people rather than of God; they kept the revenue being brought in by the temple instead of distributing it to the poor; they gloried in the prestige they had among the community. And people do what is modeled by their leaders. The rich merchants were swindling the poor in the marketplace, making more and more money, acquiring more and more stuff, and leaving the vulnerable to fend for

themselves by begging in the streets – a far cry from the perfect equality and justice and love for all found in God’s kingdom.

God sent his prophets, one by one, to Jerusalem, to pass along his message: You are going far astray of my ways, turn back or you will destroy yourselves. Those people of Jerusalem who were leading pampered, glorious lives did not want to give up those pampered and glorious lives and “shot the messenger” so to speak. One by one, the prophets were at best – ignored – and at worst – killed.

It is important to know that, when God sent those prophets to declare judgement on those who had gone astray, the purpose for doing this was so that those upon whom the judgment falls would realize the predicament in which they had placed themselves, repent, and be renewed. Judgment from God is pronounced for the sake of salvation.

Today we witness the ultimate prophet – God’s Son, who is God in the flesh – heading with determination to Jerusalem to pronounce judgement, to tell the people they have gone astray and to encourage them to repent, to turn back to God’s ways. In Jesus’ lament for Jerusalem, we hear his distress in knowing God’s own people have turned to the ways of the world and he knows that many of them will not turn back to God. They will, instead, kill God’s prophet sent to save them. That the city of God’s habitation becomes the seat of such violent opposition to God is part of the tragic story of Israel’s salvation history...indeed, is a part of the tragic story of our salvation history.

Our story is eerily similar to Israel’s story. We, the Church, the habitation of God has often borne striking resemblance to the failings of Jerusalem across the centuries – accumulating wealth, reveling in human glory and human accolades, working to

wipe out those who are not like us or to mold them into being just like us. There are many who would echo Gandhi's words, even some in our families who would say with him, "We like your Christ, we do not like your Christians."

Throughout Lent we are preparing ourselves to experience Jesus' cross. Today's story pleads with us to consider whether our lives, as individuals and as Church, lead us to that cross. The cross for Jesus was perfect love, perfect relationship with God and with all creation. The cross is the building up of others through second chances and the ever present offer of salvation. The cross is compassion, never gossip or mean words. It is embracing the world not selectively choosing some and not others, it is not leaving out those whom we think God is rejecting. As the Church we are, thankfully, more than the sum of our parts since we fall short of the perfection of Christ time and again. But Lent is our time to honestly reflect on our shortcomings and allow Jesus to gather us under his wings. Lent is the time to honestly reflect on what we, together, are doing with Christ's body on earth – do we reflect the revelation of God's kingdom, living as God would have us live? We don't always get things right but we often do.

Worship together, inside and outside of the church building, transforms us into the people who do reveal God's kingdom to the world by living it and inviting others to live in it. We are constantly a work in progress, moving toward perfection. Lent is a time to take stock of our progress and to revive the passion for making still more progress – to undo what previous generations have gotten wrong, what we have gotten wrong, and to journey together in God's kingdom where we will never again hear the words, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians."