

Gathering chicks 17 March 19 Fr Michael

Fire can be a terrifying thing, as well as a means for warmth and comfort both externally and internally through cooking ingredients to feed us.

When one thinks of fire as a destructive force we may remember our history lessons and the great fire of London with all the devastation that it caused. Yet further back in history we may know something of the fire in AD 64 which destroyed half of Rome. The New Testament writers would have known the effects of this fire, as it would have been the talk of the empire.

The fire lasted for a week as buildings and tenements burned.

Now if fire is frightening for us humans it is even more so for animals. Some may be tethered or trapped in pens or coops. They may have no means of escape or be bewildered at which way to run. Some animals have developed ways of protecting their young, and I am thinking here of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings. Yes, there are stories of exactly this: after a farmyard fire dead hens have been found, scorched and blackened yet with live chicks under her wings sheltering from the fire. The mother hen has given her life to save her chicks, she has made a great sacrifice, her life for her offspring.

Now Jesus may have had this image in mind when he said that he wanted to gather all those in Jerusalem under his wings. By saying Jerusalem he was implying all of Israel and it is a vivid image that he conjures up for his listeners. We wouldn't expect anything else from Jesus – would we!

All that Jesus could see around him was his chicks – the Israelites, scurrying around and in the complete opposite direction – taking no notice of the warnings of fire and danger – the smoke and flame – they were taking no notice of the one who could save them from harm and keep them safe under his wings. Indeed, in our gospel reading Jesus says they would have 'none of it'. They had heard him speak, they had seen him perform miracles, but they would have none of it.

The farm yard image was very much in his mind for the other great danger to hens and chickens is the fox. And Jesus calls Herod a fox.

Herod has been a dark shadow ever present in Jesus' ministry, but has not until now posed any threat to him. The Pharisees have come to warn Jesus that Herod wants Jesus dead. They may have been some of the more moderate Pharisees waiting to see if this Man was really of God such as Gamaliel who we hear about in Acts 5. They may have had genuine concern for Jesus' safety, and been warning him to be careful. On the other hand they may have been from the extreme group of Pharisees who wanted Jesus gone from their area – he was a trouble maker stirring up the people.

Jesus shows his contempt for Herod. Herod's only claim to the throne was from the Romans who had given him governorship of Galilee, his father you will remember had the same name, and had been the biggest thug that had been seen for generations. The Romans had promoted Herod the son to keep order at this extreme of the empire.

Jesus speaks of his destiny – his vocation, which was to die at the hands of the authorities – but not in Galilee under Herod's jurisdiction – no, in Jerusalem which had stoned and killed so many prophets – so many messengers from God.

Jesus had a destiny to fulfil – two days work and one day's completion. Two days to cast out demons and heal the sick; 'and I shall be finished on the third day.' The careful reader of Luke's gospel notices the parallels with the boy Jesus found in the Temple on the third day and the risen Jesus, alive again on the third day.

"Jesus' destiny, then is to go to Jerusalem and die, risking the threats of the fox, and adopting the role of the mother hen to the chickens faced with sudden danger. But will Jerusalem benefit from his offer?"

Jerusalem had a long history of rebelling against God, refusing the way of peace. The only way for the city to survive the destruction that was to come was to welcome Jesus as God's peace envoy; but all the signs said that they wouldn't. "Israel's greatest crisis is coming upon her, and he is offering an urgent summons to repent, to come to his kingdom-way, his way of peace. This is the only way of avoiding the disaster which will otherwise follow her persistent rebellion." Jesus fully intends to go to Jerusalem and take upon himself the full force of the disaster that he predicts for the nation and the Temple.

And what would Jesus predict for us this Lenten tide? What would be our disaster? What should we be thinking about in Lent 2019?

The church faces challenges from the world about us, we individually face challenges from the world, or as St. Paul puts it – our stomachs. Do we have our eyes set on heavenly things or things of this world – our stomachs – our appetites – as if our stomachs were our gods. Paul warns his readers in Philippi that there are those who are the enemies of the cross of the Messiah, and, "they are on the road to destruction; they worship their stomachs, and find glory in their own shame. All they think about is what is on the earth."

The present body will die, and if we worship the body we are entering a covenant with death itself. The cross of Jesus stands firmly in front of us, to turn us to Christ, to turn us and point us to life. Jesus and his action on the cross, though brutal and horrible to contemplate, is also a soft welcoming of feathers to gather us in, to bring us together into a kingdom of peace and security with Jesus as our Lord.

And it is here in church that we gather - this is our encounter with liturgy and through it with each other and with God. Each mass begins with the 'Gathering' as we recall that we meet - 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.' and we all say 'Amen,' - we say yes to gathering together. And here we need each other, we concelebrate, there is a mutual dependence of celebrant and people. Father David cannot say mass on his own - he needs all of us to make it a reality. So the gathering is the first and basic act of the eucharist and it continues as a dialogue between president and people - often with a sealing word "amen." Self evidently the sermon is both preached and received - an act of listening, just as we have listened to the readings and respond in intercessions. At the 'Peace' we exclaim and show that we love one another - the whole gathering joined in a greeting. In the communion Christ gathers us into one as the children of God - gathered by Christ and in Christ. This is the holiness of the church - a royal priesthood, a chosen race - we make 'the body of Christ' right here with our presence. We need each other. Through the means of gathering we make Christ's body - we encounter God.

By gathering together as the church we are stronger, we gain strength from each other, as we gather here to hear the Bible read, to meditate upon its meaning, to pray and to partake in communion with Jesus at his supper we are strong, united in his body.

Yes, Jesus wants to gather in his chicks - and he will make the ultimate sacrifice and give his life for his chicks.

Amen.