

Luke 13:31-35 – “No Ambush” – Lent 2 – Mar 7/04

“Some Pharisees came to him and said, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you’.” Now that’s a totally different picture from the normal or usual one that we have of the Pharisees, isn’t it? Whether from the pulpit or the picture screen we normally get an image of Pharisees that is distinctly unflattering, even downright negative. Say the word ‘Pharisee’ and immediately we envision a harsh, legalistic religious authority busy laying traps for Jesus. But here we are told that some of these very same people were actually trying to help Jesus, to help save his life, even, from Herod.

Now this was not Herod the Great, but his son Herod Antipas, and he was tetrarch of Galilee during Jesus’ ministry. He had beheaded John the Baptist and now he was perplexed about Jesus, especially because there was a strong rumour that Jesus was John raised from the dead. Apparently Herod wanted to cure his perplexity by killing Jesus also – I’m sure he thought, “that’ll do it, that’ll end this crazy religious movement among the people”.

And so some Pharisees came to Jesus, to warn him of the impending danger from Herod, and to advise him to flee. It was pretty good advice, and probably would have worked. If Jesus had left Galilee then he would have been out of Herod’s reach, and relatively safe. He could probably have carried on a very successful ministry for years, healing and affecting countless people. That’s not certain, however, because Jesus lived in a very troubled time in the Middle East. The land in which Jesus lived was occupied by the superpower of the moment, the Romans, and their troops, although highly-disciplined, were accustomed to using whatever force they thought appropriate to put down any hint of rebellion or resistance. The Romans appointed tetrarchs (kind of like convenors of governing councils) who had a great deal of arbitrary power over the lives and deaths of the people under their thumbs. There was, understandably, much resentment among those people who lived and died under those thumbs, and as a consequence a great deal of rebellion and resistance (which the Romans, naturally enough since it was directed at them, called terrorism).

As history has proven time and time again, things got a whole lot worse in that area before they got better. Not just in Galilee and Judea, where the rebellions rose to a fever pitch and the retribution strikes matched blow for blow until eventually the Romans leveled the Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD. The same thing was happening throughout all of the countries where the Romans had invaded to make their world a safer place, and the strain was telling on them. The cost of maintaining the troops in all of these far-flung places, and humongous defense schemes like a wall to keep the rampaging Scots out, caused huge strains on the economy back home. Rising prices, rising taxes, declining investments, and a huge rise in corruption began to make the heart of the Roman empire a not very pleasant place to live. A scapegoat was needed, and those people with their new religion that came out of that Galilee or Judea or Jerusalem were the perfect targets, and soon they became the ‘official’ cause of all of the troubles of the imploding superpower.

And so it was that those people of that new religion, those who called themselves “the people of the way” and also identified themselves as “Christians”, were thrown into a situation of perpetual danger. More and more they lived in a world where by simply carrying on with their faith they ran a very real risk of being arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed. To these people, who in the very act of inviting others to find the peace and new life they had found put themselves and their entire families at very real risk of a horrible death, these words from Luke’s gospel rang loud and clear.

“Get away, for the authorities want to kill you”, was the advice given to Jesus, and those early Christians could relate. From all sides, from family and friends alike they would hear the same warning and earnest plea, “give it up, get away, drop this way of faith and save your life”. They would be sorely tempted to take that advice, to take what would appear to be the easy way out, and whether

they did or not, they would be racked with the guilt of even being tempted by the offer. But it was incidents such as this one that reaffirmed their faith, and their choice.

Jesus must have been tempted by this advice as well. How could anyone even imagine that he had not thought about the option of doing exactly what the well-meaning Pharisees were recommending? Just as he had been tempted in the wilderness with the idea that he could solve his own hunger problems anytime he wanted to, here he is tempted with the idea that he could likewise solve the problems of danger to his health and well-being.

But he didn't succumb to the temptation then, and he doesn't succumb to it here. "Go tell that fox for me", he begins his message of reply. "That fox" – a curious little detail. Is it meant to imply that Jesus saw a cunning and malevolent scheme behind the warning, thinking that any attempt he made to flee the area would be exactly what Herod wanted, thus either getting rid of him or using the attempt to dishonour Jesus?

Whether or not Jesus might have thought about Herod's motives, his answer was sure and clear, "not yet". "I have much to do before you can kill me, and besides, you can only kill me in Jerusalem", is the essence of Jesus' reply to Herod. The time was not yet, Jesus makes clear, and won't be until his triumphant entry into Jerusalem with the crowds crying, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

How much clearer could Jesus have been about his coming death? How much more clear could he make it that his being betrayed, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion was no surprise ambush, but an unfolding of events to satisfy a divine imperative? "Not yet", Jesus replies, "we will do this on my time, in God's time", as he continued to teach, to preach, to heal, to cure, to save.

And there was no ambush, at least in the sense of the final attack on Jesus being a surprise. The only surprise was how it all turned out, and even that was no surprise to Jesus. When the time was right, he made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and the crowds who saw him did indeed cry out, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Just as he had told his disciples, Jesus was indeed betrayed, arrested, convicted and executed on a cross. But also, just as he had told his disciples, on the third day he rose again, and once more met with them in his beloved Jerusalem, proving that not the Jewish authorities, not the Roman Empire, not even death itself could defeat the love of God at work in him.

And so the early believers, those who at the risk of their lives proclaimed their faith in him through identifying themselves with his name, those early Christians could hear this passage in ways we can hardly understand. They, who shared much the same fate as Jesus for their belief in him, knew clearly that they shared also in his victory over death. They knew in their hearts that although they could be ambushed even or especially in a worship service, no ambush could separate them from the one who was obedient unto death and beyond, and who in his victory over death offered them a share in that victory just for believing. That's why, even in the worst of the oppression and suffering those early Christians could be heard singing hymns while waiting to die horribly in the arena; why they could be heard offering thanks in prayer while being tortured and killed. They could remember these words in the fresh new gospel and be reminded that just as Jesus' death was no ambush, no accident, his promise of life eternal was sealed in his own resurrection.

That oppression and danger still exists today in some parts of the world, as recent massacres in Bihl, India, and Malaysia, and Africa attest, and I would suspect that Christians there would still draw upon passages like this one for strength and comfort.

It's a bit tougher for us to hear this passage with anything like the same impact. We are blessed to live in a place of relative peace and calm in the history of the world. We do not have to scuttle from Shopper's Drug Mart to the back door of the church, afraid for our very lives that we will be identified

and tagged next to be arrested or worse. We can sleep soundly at night, fairly confident that our door will not be kicked in, that we will not be dragged away screaming in terror because someone has identified us as belonging to that new and seditious religion.

But even so, we too need assurance that our life, our faith is not in vain. We need to be reminded as we face our own mortality, even our own death, that our hope is not in vain. We need, time and again, to see that Jesus was not some 'good man', a great prophet, even a miracle worker. We need to hear, as we do in this passage, that Jesus truly was the Son of God, that he was working to God's timetable, not anyone else's, that his death was no ambush, no accident but part of the sealing of God's covenant with us, a covenant confirmed in Christ's rising again victorious over even death itself. We need to hear over and over again that his victory is ours, as we share with him that victory through our faith, our belief. We need to hear it over and over again, until we too join the whole throng of God's people on that day of ultimate victory crying "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", even our Lord Jesus Christ.