Commitment and Compassion

2nd Sunday in Lent
(24-2-13)

It’s important to see today’s Gospel passage as part of the bigger picture in God’s plan of saving us. In it we see two strong characteristics of Jesus. The first is His commitment and the second is His compassion.

His commitment is to follow the mission entrusted to him by God. Jesus’ destiny lies in the city of Jerusalem and his entire ministry is directed towards this: of ministering to people, going to the cross, rising from the dead. As he nears the city His mission becomes ever more dangerous. There’s always opposition to God’s plans.

We can’t assume the Pharisees were motivated by concern for Jesus. They may have wished to divert him from his goal by moving him, perhaps to an area where they had more influence. But, rather than waste time in identifying their motives, He decided that He had a task to complete and nothing was going to stop Him.

It is easy to falsely portray Jesus as gentle, meek and mild. Here, we see Jesus being urged to leave Jerusalem because of a death threat and His response is to boldly challenge the authority of the Roman governor and to assert His determination to finish the work His Father’s given him to do. He was not afraid of danger. He followed a “divine timetable” and nothing could harm Him. He was doing the will of God according to the Father’s schedule. It had been decreed from eternity that the Son of God would be crucified in Jerusalem at the Passover and even Herod Antipas could not hinder the purposes of God.

Using a little sarcasm He compares Herod to a fox, an animal not held in high esteem by the Jews. Known for its cunning, the fox was an apt illustration of crafty Herod. After all, Jesus walked in the light and foxes went hunting in the darkness! Jesus had work to do and He would accomplish it. Nothing will deflect him from this task.

Can the same be said of us? In what ways might we be distracted from the work God has called
us to do?

Jesus is not deflected by the death threat; He’s not frightened by bullying tactics, almost seeming to expect such things. Jesus knows Jerusalem’s long history of stubborn refusal to hear the voice of God. The persecution of the prophets happened many times in the history of the Jews. And even though Jesus knew for certain that he was going to his death he was determined to do things God's way whatever people might say or do. We see His steadfast determination and commitment to do His Father’s will.

But then we’re suddenly shown another aspect of Jesus’ character as He looks at the city of Jerusalem. His heart was grieved as He saw the unbelief and rebellion around Him. Here’s God’s chosen city continuing to reject the voice of the prophets, as it has done for centuries.

They would reject and kill him, as their predecessors had rejected and killed the prophets. They do not know what they are missing by being so blind and deaf! He breaks out in a lamentation over the sad plight of the Jewish nation. It is a sob of anguish, not an expression of anger. His compassionate heart was broken at the Jewish people’s rejection of their Messiah. Jesus longs to gather them up into his arms tenderly as a mother hen does to her chicks.

We usually think of God as our Father but several passages in the Bible show Him as mother too – this just one of many – and I won’t go into all of them now. But think of the creation passage where God says ‘Let US make mankind in our image’ (partly an argument for the Trinity) but also for there being male and female in God because it goes on to say ‘So God created mankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.’

God’s love is deep, gentle and compassionate. In terms of fatherhood we might think of it in terms of oversight, care and concern. But it is also that of a mother’s love too wanting to tenderly wrap us in His loving arms.

It’s a holy love that wills the best for us. Like a mother’s love that doesn’t just watch us settling down to lazy comfortable sin. A love that often has to lead us through difficult times and suffering in order to make us more Christlike. Mum’s make us do things we don’t like: homework, eating greens etc. Things that are good for us but that we don’t like. But they do it with our best interest at heart.
Jesus wants the Pharisees to turn to Him and be saved. He does the same with us today. How often do we ignore His way and try doing things our way? These two aspects of the character of Jesus always need to be kept together. On the one hand there is the steely, fearless determination to obey the will of his Father, and on the other His tender, sensitive invitation to all. But Jesus also does not force himself upon an unwilling and unbelieving community. He waits patiently for their response. How does this knowledge of the character of Jesus affect us?

Jesus' compassion over the city reveals the heart of God the Father who longs that all may be saved but being the people of God should not make us complacent. God offers himself freely to us but also invites us to freely respond intimately to him as the loving parent He is. That might make us feel vulnerable? For some of us the relationship that we have had, or not had, with our earthly parents, can be very destructive.

But the Bible does quite clearly show us a God who wants to be the most loving of parents - the absolutely super ideal that only He can do. Earthly parents can imitate it but can never come near it.

Lent’s a time to examine ourselves and see where we are in our relationship with God. Sometimes we might not know where to start looking at this. I hope that it might be helpful to try thinking about God as our loving parent. Even if we can only do this from watching others around us living out the roles of child and parent.

This picture of a hen, gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them is perhaps all the more pertinent because of just having spoken about Herod as a fox. There are many stories of how, after farmyard fires, dead hens have been found, scorched and blackened – with live chicks sheltering under their wings. The hen has quite literally given her life to save them.

It is a vivid and violent image of what Jesus declared he longed to do for Jerusalem and, by implication, for all Israel. But, at this moment, all he could see was chicks scurrying off in the opposite direction, taking no notice of the urgent warnings of the one who alone could give them safety. We need to turn to Him.
This picture of the hen and the chickens is the strongest statement so far in Luke of what Jesus thinks his death would be all about. Jesus’ intention now, in obedience to his vocation, is to go to Jerusalem and, like the hen with the chickens, to take upon himself the full force of that disaster which he was predicting for the nation and the Temple. And of him being the one will give himself on behalf of the many.

Let’s pray that this Lent time may be a time when we are able to come to God who is both our Father and Mother and that we learn to allow Him to direct us and embrace us as He wanted to do to His people then.