

## Animals

## Luke 13.31-35

I want us to think about animals for a few minutes this morning. We have just heard Jesus refer to Herod as a 'fox', and to say how he has longed to gather the children of Jerusalem under his wing like a hen gathers her chicks. Foxes and chickens don't go together too well, do they, but here they are within a verse or two of each other. We respond to animal language because we are a nation of animal-lovers - our TV schedules not only have lots of animal programmes, but programmes about vets and zoos as well. Our language uses animal imagery to help us talk about people. So we may find someone referred to as a tiger, or a great bear of a man. Someone may be criticised as being catty or bitchy. We may be said to be sheepish, or as quiet as a mouse. Others are perceived as being a bull in a china shop or a wise old owl, or a busy bee, or a dirty rat, or an ass. That thread runs through the whole of our way of talking. Sometimes, in order to help people understand themselves, I have asked them which animal they would like to be - quite often people surprise themselves with the answer they come up with.

So here Jesus calls Herod a 'fox'. That was an insult, in the language of his day. We have a slightly tongue-in-cheek if we call someone a 'sly old fox'. There seems to be in English a kind of grudging admiration for the fox's cunning. There was nothing of that in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. Slyness was not an admired virtue, and the fox was thought of as the most sly of all animals. It was also seen as the most destructive - which allowing for the fact that there were bears and wolves around in the middle-east at that time is quite an indictment. Perhaps most of all we need to know that to call someone a fox was to say they were worthless and insignificant. And here Jesus calls Herod Antipas, King of Galilee 'a fox'. He is sly because this intervention by these Pharisees is seen through by Jesus - they have come ostensibly to warn Jesus of Herod's antipathy - in fact they are his mouthpieces. Herod wanted Jesus out of his territory - he was causing problems with Herod's relationship with the Jewish leaders. If we can get him to move on, that will make life easier. The message to Herod is quite clear - I *will* be leaving soon - but not because of you, but because I have to get to Jerusalem. Now it takes courage to call a King a fox, especially if the people you say it to are likely to go straight back to him and tell him. It is akin maybe to some country preacher in Syria a few years ago saying Assad was a fox. It is neither tactful nor conducive to safety.

It is a splendid antidote to the religious pap that many of us have been nurtured on. I turn over when I find myself singing 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild', and I have to grit my teeth each Christmas to sing 'mild, obedient, good as he.' There is no way, according to Luke, that Jesus was meek and mild. Jesus was outspoken, abrasive and courageous. His animal language is a perfect example of that. I remember going to a conference where the speaker made many of us sit up by his animal language. He talked of the way some people dispose of their pre-school children in order that they can work as 'kennelling them' - and went on to say that he suspected that many of those same people took more care over the kennels they put their dogs in than the nurseries they put their children in. It was powerful imagery, because again it asked us to see ourselves in animal terms. Jesus was being even more outspoken than that. He wasn't even being polite. That again may be quite difficult for us to grasp. We also have the in-built image of Jesus as a rather nice chap, who can be trusted to say the right thing, and not rub people up the wrong way. Not so - he was very happy to make people feel very uncomfortable, to challenge their well-established prejudices, and was not at all an easy-going personality. But it wasn't gratuitous rudeness - it was being plain-speaking. It was an example of the fact that kings and prostitutes, religious leaders and paupers were all equal in God's eyes. It would have been easy to be deferential, but it would have been untrue to that basic perception. The story is told of Hugh Latimer preaching in Westminster Abbey. King Henry VIII was in the congregation. Latimer said out loud to himself 'Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say, the King of England is here!' And then he went on: Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say, the King of Kings is here!' Jesus held only God in awe, and Herod Antipas was just another of God's creatures. We run the risk of being like Sir Humphrey in Yes Minister, and not talking straight. It is not Christ-like to be gratuitously offensive. But neither is it Christ-like to avoid telling things how they really are, even if that is difficult for others to take. Jesus was never mealy-mouthed. Sometimes c.21<sup>st</sup> Christians are.

But over against that difficult language of the fox, we also heard the rather warm and cosy language of the hen. 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.' Now in a way that is just as startling and disturbing an animal image as Jesus calling Herod a fox. I think I could be fairly certain that if I had asked everyone to pick an animal to represent God, it is most unlikely many would have chosen a hen - a lion, maybe, but not a hen. For a start we are largely conditioned to using male language about God, and if there is one thing a hen definitely is not, is male! But here is Jesus, whether he is speaking of himself, or of God - (and on that point the scholars differ in their interpretation of that verse) - saying he or God is like a hen - and if we believe in the incarnation,

then it doesn't make much difference which interpretation is right. Female language to describe God - you remember all the hub-bub a few years back by prayers speaking of God as our Mother - is nothing new. Jesus happily uses female imagery of God.

Look at what that image is - the hen is motherly and concerned for her brood - we still use language like that now - she is a mother-hen. She scurries round clucking after them, rounding them up, keeping them together, ensuring they are safe. She puts her wings around them for security. That is nothing new that Jesus is teaching. The Psalmist spoke in several places praying that we might 'hide under the shadow of God's wings'. But it is an image that was not taken very seriously. God had become very distant in people's minds, very powerful, very frightening, even. But embedded in those ancient texts was the idea of God our mother-hen. I think that is wonderful language - and something we ought to be able to rejoice in. God's care for me is like a hen's care for her chicks. I am utterly vulnerable and powerless. But God is there to look after me, and ensure I am all right. It *is* very cosy image, and we are entitled to that cosiness. We hear in the Old Testament lesson today about the setting up of the covenant with Abram - a rather bloodthirsty ritual which involved cutting various animals in two but which said in essence - 'if either of us goes back on this covenant, may we be split like these animals'. It was a powerful image of promised care. It is God who enters into that covenant as much as Abram. He has promised his care. He will be the mother hen. Our male-dominated Christianity has sometimes forgotten that very feminine image. But if we do so, we are forgetting what Jesus himself said.

Maybe it is not entirely arbitrary that Luke uses these two images so close together. We have a very male and aggressive part where Jesus speaks of Herod as the fox. And then almost immediately we have his feminine image of God as mother hen. If male and female are both part of the nature of God, as Genesis implies, then we need to keep on checking that the faith we have and express has kept that balance. If it is all male and aggressive, then we have got it wrong; if it is all female and cosy we have got it wrong. The truth is not in one or the other, but in both. Sometimes we need one more than the other, but we cannot do without both. So some of us need to be jolted by the startling language of the fox, to shift from an over-feminine image of God, encapsulated if you like in the 'gentle Jesus' syndrome; and others of us need to be jolted by the startling language of the hen to shift from an over-masculine image of God. Either way, the language of animals opens up new vistas of what God is for us all.