

Reflection

Luke 13:31-35

Some years ago, when I was working for the Presbytery, I found myself preaching on this passage in the small town of Kulin. I was actually there to spend some time listening for the Presbytery to the needs of the country congregations. As I started my time of reflection, I said that with our Gospel reading today, if I was in a city congregation I might have talked about the image of Herod the fox threatening the chickens, but I thought they could probably teach me a lot more about that than I could say to them!

Immediately one of the men in the small congregation replied "I sure could – a fox got into my chicken coop this week..." The congregation did not need more details. They knew what the results would have been.

This, of course, illustrated my point completely: we all bring life experiences and learning that give us a deeper perspective on the Bible readings, especially when we listen to people whose life experience has elements that are closer to biblical life, as the congregation in Kulin certainly did over any city congregation.

And so, with that much as a preface, I am going to do something that is very unusual for me – I am about to reuse the reflection I wrote 6 years ago for the Uniting Church in Kulin. I think it is still just as relevant in this very different context as it was in that pre-Covid world of 2019.

If there was one theme I would use to connect today's readings, it would be to expect the unexpected. In our Gospel reading things are suddenly turned upside down. We have been taught to see the Pharisees as the enemy (with a few rare exceptions). They are depicted as hypocritical, sticking to the Law when there are good reasons not to do so, and of course being party to the death of Jesus. Now there is a group of them trying to give Jesus a warning about Herod's threats against him.

The first audience of this Gospel would have experienced many of the Pharisees as something of an enemy. This Gospel was written around 80CE in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem. Not only was this a highly traumatic event that had only occurred 10 years earlier. Jerusalem was decimated and desecrated in this event. A four-year siege ended with an invasion and slaughter. One of the outcomes of this was the separation of Christianity and Judaism. Prior to this point, they were simply a sect within Judaism. In response to the fall of Jerusalem, the Pharisees, who were the main surviving sect, started to push the Christians out of the synagogues and even said regular prayers against the Christians. As a result the Christians lost the protection of Judaism as a special religion and therefore were open to the waves of persecution from Rome that they subsequently experienced.

You may be wondering why all of this is important. It is hardly surprising that much of what we read in the Gospels that portray the Pharisees badly was written in response to these developments. If we think about how we picture the enemy, whether this is in politics, novels, or other life experiences, it can often be in a black and white way. It is human nature to want to see all of "them" as being bad or wrong (with the implication that "we" are good and right). In an ABC article exploring why some people have had such difficulty with the conviction of Pell, Dr Rachel Sharman, a lecturer in psychology, wrote:

You have a mental picture of someone based on your experience with that person who you may have known, respected and even loved for years. Suddenly, new information is presented that throws your entire conception of this individual into chaos. But here's the real kicker. If you were so wrong about this person, what does that say about your character assessment of everyone else you know and love? It's a horrifying possibility — and too much for some to bear.

In today's stories with the Pharisees, as so often in life, we are being asked to do the opposite. We are being asked to see someone who has often been depicted as the enemy, and view them as people who are capable of doing good.

This nuancing of the people we meet is important for us as human being; it is part of the experience of what it is to be human. However, it is also very difficult for us to do. Besides our human tendency to want to categorize people and leave things there, society wants us to do this as this often seems to benefit the "in" group. However, when we do not recognise the goodness in other people, we lose out on the relationship we could have with them; and this relationship can help us grow beyond who we currently are.

So as we finish this time of reflection, I invite you to take a few moments to reflect on a time when you have unexpectedly encounter the good in another person; someone you were taught to see as the enemy or other. How did you respond at the time? What would it mean to acknowledge that shared humanity?