

Second Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

In our reading today, Jesus receives a death threat. I wonder what the tone and level of animosity were as the Pharisees came to Jesus and told him ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’?

Were they trying to help Jesus by bringing a warning?
Or were they threatening him?

Think while reading about the serious nature of a death threat and the effect it has on mental health and wellbeing.

Why does Jesus respond as he does?
Is his response what you would expect?

Text

Luke 13:31–35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Comment

Jesus did not live in a world of social media and mass communication. The Pharisees had to physically visit him to pass on the news of Herod’s intention to kill him. Reading the passage with this news as a death threat, and not a kindly warning, Jesus replied, ‘Go and tell that fox’ which suggests he heard the warning as a threat and was aware (especially given the fate of his cousin, John the Baptist) that Herod meant to carry it out.

In the United Kingdom, and in most other jurisdictions, a threat of serious harm, including death, is a criminal offence, and carries a serious consequence in the event of a conviction. For Jesus, the threatening power had the confidence of the Roman administration. This threat is being made by Herod Antipas, who was tetrarch, or joint ruler, of Galilee and Perea. Herod Antipas was a client-ruler (not technically styled King, though the use of this term in scripture suggests that ordinary people commonly thought of him in that role). Jesus, by way of contrast, was a vulnerable, homeless, religious teacher who would have had no recourse to justice. He places this threat upon his own life in the context of other prophets and missionaries who had been stoned in the city of Jerusalem.

In our age of social media, death threats, online harassment, and other forms of abuse have become serious issues. Celebrities and public figures are frequently the target of negative social media attention. Members of Parliament in the UK, such as Mhairi Black, Anas Sarwar, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, and others, have all been subjected to abusive or threatening tweets. The murder of Jo Cox – a Labour MP who was shot and stabbed on the street near her constituency office in a politically motivated crime – demonstrates that while the sheer volume of online abuse suggests that not every threat will be translated into action, the reality is that there is a risk of the ultimate cost being paid by public figures as a result of the actions of people with extremist views.

If this is the case for public figures, it is also true for private citizens, and those with particular “protected characteristics,” including women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and individuals from racial and religious minorities suffer a disproportionate amount of online abuse or harassment.

Jesus does acknowledge the risk that he may be killed, and suggests that this will not occur outside Jerusalem. It may seem odd, given his rebuttal of the death threat, in which he says he will simply continue to heal the sick and cast out demons, that he then expresses sympathy for Jerusalem, the seat of the ruler who is threatening to kill him. It would be more, surely, than could be expected of a victim of abuse to have any sympathy with those who were threatening them with death. Yet it would be hard to argue, given that Jesus has just said ‘it would be impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem,’ that he doesn’t include in his next statement those who wish to kill him:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

In this text Jesus identifies with a mother hen. He describes the natural behaviour of a hen when threatened with danger, to gather her chicks under her wings. Yet, he exclaims that the people of Jerusalem are not willing to come into his comforting, mothering, wingspan. Instead, they reject him, and for now he will leave to continue his teaching, healing and ministering for a while longer.

Response

Think about the ways in which social media enables people to threaten others anonymously or from a distance. What part does allowing anonymity online play in exacerbating abusive or threatening speech?

Why do distinctive characteristics, for example being a turban-wearing Sikh, a hijab-wearing Muslim, a transgender person, or having a disability, lead to individuals suffering more of this kind of abusive language online?

How would we extend Jesus’ mothering sheltering wing in situations of abuse or hate crime? Would we consider only the victims to be worthy of shelter, or, like Jesus, can we extend shelter to all of Jerusalem? Under Jesus’ sheltering wing, how do we work with victims with dignity and solidarity to end stigma and discrimination?

Those who Jesus most wanted to shelter under his mothering wing refused. How do we, as a society, cope with those who refuse to accept goodness as a method of dealing with others, or indeed as a challenge to hostile and unacceptable behaviour?

Prayer

Today we pray with a consciousness that Jesus was not able to prevent the brutal end to his Lent journey. We know those who plotted and threatened to kill him prevailed. Enable us, as we try to understand the brutality and injustice of hate crime, to understand the journey Jesus walked.

Lenten God,
it may be too much for us to grasp the mother-hen love of Jesus.
That one so frail, vulnerable, and poor, facing threats to his own life,
could extend a warm, secure, loving wing to those who threatened him.
Comfort us, under that same shelter,
Lenten God,
open our eyes to see, understand, and, protest
the trauma of those who live with threats: always unwarranted,
unfair, unjustified and unacceptable.
Lenten God,
we step forward with humble feet,
in the hope that we
may make a gentle word carry far
and that a firm resolution to speak into abuse and harassment
with calm, honest resolution
will be our resolve.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ,
Amen