

Who knows how well Luke, or Jesus for that matter, knew his Greek fables? Maybe they knew, as we do, that some six centuries earlier, the well known moralist and slave Aesop had written this:

A fox was out looking for a late supper. He came to a henhouse, and through the open door, he could see a hen far up on the highest perch, safe out of his reach.

Here, thought the fox, was a case for diplomacy. Either that or go hungry! So he gave considerable thought to just how he should approach his intended supper.

“Hello, there, friend hen,” said he in an anxious voice. “I haven’t seen you about of late. Somebody told me that you have had a sick spell, and I was sincerely worried about you. You look pale as a ghost. If you will just step down, I’ll take your pulse and look at your tongue. I’m afraid you’re in for quite a siege.”

“You never said a truer word, cousin fox,” replied the hen. “It will have to be a siege, for I am in a such a state that if I were to climb down to where you are, I’m afraid it would be the death of me”.

At that very hour, some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” And Jesus said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me to catch me if he can. I’ll be here, casting out demons, and performing cures today and tomorrow. But after that, I must be on my way to Jerusalem — and you may remind him, it is Jerusalem, not Galilee, where the prophets die.”

And he goes on, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...”

There is certainly the sly fox about Herod — indeed, about the Pharisees themselves, who are frequently depicted as trying to entrap Jesus in a web of insincere flattery and clever questions. Some commentators believe they are engaged in exactly the same behaviour here. After all, if it is true that there is no place like Jerusalem for stoning the prophets, then what better strategy for hurrying Jesus along to the killing grounds than to tell him he’s no longer safe in Galilee? The point is this: all around Jesus, the forces of deceit and trickery are being quietly marshalled to ensure his destruction. The religious and civil authorities alike are smacking their lips in the expectation of dining on his death. (It is an excruciating irony, is it not? For thanks to their conniving, we do indeed dine on Christ’s death — only not in the way the foxes imagined.)

Jesus, for his part, is no dupe. He isn’t fooled, ever, by pretence. He knows exactly what his enemies desire for him. This, in itself, might not be so remarkable. Lots of people have a good nose for duplicity: lots of people can smell a rat (or a fox, as the case may be). What is remarkable about Jesus is his response to the death-wish others hold for him. He sends a message back to Herod, “... today, tomorrow, and the next day, I must be on my way [meaning, to Jerusalem], because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

In the first instance, then, he refuses to run for cover. A confrontation is brewing, and unlike Aesop’s hen, who will not come down to face the fox, Jesus refuses to take the way of avoidance. It was an option, you know. He could have turned tail and run. But he wouldn’t do it; and he wouldn’t

do it because Jesus Christ is about anything *but* avoidance. What do you think Christmas was all about? Christmas means that God refuses to be ignorant of life on earth; refuses to keep his hands clean; rejects a policy of avoidance. He comes down from the safety of the henhouse for the express purpose of mucking about the barnyard with us. So if Jerusalem is the place where the prophets die, then you can be sure that Jesus Christ is on his way to Jerusalem. He is certainly not about to take his leave the very moment the marauders are at the barn door.

But if Jesus won't take flight, neither will he assume an overtly combative stance. He sees the evil that assails his beloved, he even sees that evil that his beloved do, and his response? — "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of visiting a small chapel on a hill overlooking Jerusalem. It is said to be the site where Jesus uttered this very lamentation, and is remarkable for the glass wall behind the altar which gives a view of the city, and for — and here I must allow Taylor to speak for herself — "the image of a rooster on the front of the altar — a bright, fierce-looking bird made out of colored tiles with a flock of little chicks under his wings."

"A rooster?" She does a double take, as do we. There's nothing about roosters in this story (at least not until cockcrow on Good Friday). Jesus said, "hen" and "her" wings. Still, Taylor imagines she can guess what motivated the artist to take such liberties with the text. A rooster is a tough bird, well equipped to defend itself and its territory. It can peck every bit as hard as a hen can, and doesn't wait to be provoked, either. But its real arsenal lies in its feet: a rooster's talons are spikey things that it uses like stilettos to claw and tear at anyone or anything that gets in its way. The artist has portrayed Jesus as a strong champion, rushing in to turn back the enemy.¹

Except, that isn't what Jesus said. He did not compare himself to a rooster, but to a hen, and a brooding hen, at that. So now look at the image. It is a mother all fluffed up doing her best to hide her children under her wings. She may be able to get a good peck in here or there (as Jesus certainly managed to do, even in his relative silence before the authorities), but her chief mission is to place herself between her young and the teeth of the fox — even if that means that she herself is the fox's dinner. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus, it turns out, is every bit as wily as Aesop's hen: he is not fooled by disingenuous professions of concern for his welfare. If he comes down at the fox's bidding (which in Jesus' case is to get away from Galilee and head straight to Jerusalem), it is not because he doesn't realise what is in store for him, but because he does. From the moment he entered that feeding trough in a stable in Bethlehem, he has been preparing to be fed upon. He is not about to avoid the slaughter now. But he will come to the sacrifice as victim, not as combatant. And in so doing, in refusing to employ the tactics of violence and power and hatred, he will win back the world from the brink of hell. It is not perhaps the way we would have gone about it — for we are masters of avoidance (which, of course, is not to go about it at all) and combat, of fight and flight.

But here is the thing. It wasn't up to us. And good thing, too, because God bet the farm on the hen.²

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1997), p. 124.

² The phrase is Taylor's. *Ibid.*, p. 126.