

THE WORK OF HENS IN A WORLD OF FOXES

Luke 13: 31-35

Coventry Cathedral; Corrymeela Sunday

16 March 2025

It is good to be back in Coventry. I am again grateful to the dean and to the other saints of St. Michael's for your warm welcome and your commitment to marking the Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day as Corrymeela Sunday. I'm increasingly grateful for the opportunity, particularly this year as you are helping us at Corrymeela mark our 60th anniversary as a community committed to peace and reconciliation. Much of our own history is tied up with your own – with links not only through your generosity but also our shared connection in how the bombing of Dresden led us to answer the call to love God and neighbour and enemy as we love ourselves.

I'm sorry to say that 85 years after the Coventry Blitz and 80 years after the bombing of Dresden, 60 years after Corrymeela was founded, the ministry of reconciliation is more urgent than ever. The lessons we have carried these past 60, 80 years are at real risk of being lost.

On the Prowl

It will not have escaped your attention that authoritarianism is on the rise in 2025. And the worry is that these past 80 years of relative peace in the post-war period will end up looking like the exception to the rule, that without a correction we will slip back into a brutal 'might-makes-right' world with brutal predatory economic practices and expansionist imperial competition between a few dominant powers. This rise in authoritarianism is being fuelled by 'us versus them' politics that capitalise on our human need to belong and prey on our natural fear that there will not be enough to go around. Isn't it odd that in this time of greatest abundance, so few of us feel secure? And when there is such a sense of scarcity at work, a running premise that if those people are getting more, I must be getting less, it is no surprise that we are reverting to our baser instincts and choosing to take care of our own – turning to leaders who exploit our fear of scarcity by promising to get us what they can before others snatch it away. It's very clever, this preying on our fears. But, of course, it leaves us all less safe. When we don't need to be.

Both of our scripture passages for this morning land with greater weight in this context. Paul warns us in *Philippians* about those whose god is their belly; whose glory is in their shame; whose minds are set on earthly things.' And it's striking that in our passage from *Luke* this morning, Jesus seems keenly aware of the danger at play, and in a defiant mood. In a rare flash of anger, he calls the murderous Herod 'that fox'. He says: 'Go and tell that fox for me' that I will do what I must do – I will continue to cast out demons and perform cures and do the work of a prophet no matter the risk. Jesus's mind is set. He will do the work of God. Paul's exhortation to us clear: we are to follow a different way, one not of this world.

Jesus also refers to himself, quite memorably, as a wannabe chicken. He laments the state of the world, the attitudes of Jerusalem in the time of Herod, and says; 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.' How often I have desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. An odd thing to want to be: a hen in a world of foxes. One might prefer to be a farmer with a double-barrelled shotgun. But Jesus prefers the choice of a mother hen, and therefore leaves us Christians with the challenge: how will we carry on with our ministry of reconciliation, our work of compassion, with our message of love and forgiveness in a world of brutal might-makes-right predators – a world that sees empathy as weakness? Can we really believe that the wings of a hen will protect us from a fox on the prowl?

Brooding

I'm sorry to compound our sense of worry, but I have to say I am really concerned about this brood of chicks. They seem acutely at risk. And one of the things that has me troubled lately is that the experiences of the past are no longer first-hand knowledge for our rising generations. In Northern Ireland we have only started to come to terms with the fact that because it has been 27 years since the Good Friday Agreement, there are now multiple generations who have no memory of how bad it really was and so can't appreciate the relative peace we now enjoy. That's not to say that life is better for young people in Northern Ireland. Indeed, I can give you some horrifying statistics about how poverty harms children in Northern Ireland disproportionately, and particularly in areas affected by the transgenerational trauma of our conflict. There are more reported cases of sexual offence in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in Europe. Drug use is up (way up); deaths by suicide are increasing. At a time of increased isolation, our legacy of violence accelerates the debilitating effects of disconnection. There are a lot of young people who could fall prey to the lies of a fox.

I'm also now painfully aware that the generation that rescued us from the threat of fascism in the 30s and 40s, and helped us to consider forgiveness and reconciliation in the 60s are on their way out. There are fewer around who can personally attest to why the post-war period in the West was an improvement and why going back to imperialist mindsets and predatory economic policies would be a really bad idea. But because current prospects are so unpromising, retrograde attitudes can seem romantic. 'Oh, Coventry, Dresden, Corrymeela: how I long to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.'

And perhaps, perhaps the role for us in our 60th year and you in your 80th year of contemplating your connection with Dresden is to be a shelter for the next generation of peacebuilders, to be a place of safety and nurture – but also a place of defiance, of almost absurd prophetic confrontation. Better yet, an incubator for a younger generation's natural defiance to the ways of the fox come to life: inheriting our lessons and teaching us some of their own. In defying the way of the fox, in choosing the work of the hen, we may find ourselves more vulnerable, but we will continue to provide what is actually needed, what is strikingly different, calling out this lie of scarcity, this lie that others are less deserving than we, this lie that might somehow make right. In this defiance we join Jesus in his ministry of casting out the demons of hate and performing the cures of mercy and finishing the work of reconciliation.

Long Runs the Fox

If nothing else, we can offer hope. For over 80 years, Coventry has provided this particular gift of hope. For over 60 years, Corrymeela has provided glimpses of a better world – not because we are special or have ready answers to the world's problems, but because we commit to relationships where people can simply be themselves, and learn from others including those we have hurt and those who have hurt us and those with whom we disagree. We are a collection (a brood) of professional and amateur practitioners who wrestle with questions of faith and doubt, who share differing opinions, who continue to hurt each other and who try to forgive. And we are people who have experienced, in a community of diverse views and varied backgrounds, real hope and profound joy. We have found what the world needs: genuine connection – which is the antidote to despair. And the antidote to authoritarianism, which feeds on despair and disconnection.

The world desperately needs more experiences of genuine connection where we learn how our own wellbeing is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of the whole. We must choose not live in fear of the fox or those the fox would have us fear. For while there are real reasons to be concerned, the greater danger is to give in to such fears and to give up on the promises of God.

There is a proverb. I don't know if it's English or Irish; you can all consider it your own. It says:
'Long runs the fox...before he is caught.'

In the name of the Creator and the Christ and the Holy Spirit: one God. Amen.