

UNDER GOD'S WINGS (17th March 2019, Lindfield)

LUKE 13: 31-35

I think there are 2 types of courage. One is the immediate, situational courage of the person who, in a moment of extreme need, summons the courage to face an imminent danger. This is the courage of the by-stander who pushes someone out of the way of oncoming traffic or jumps into a raging river to save someone struggling to swim at great risk to him/herself. Of course such courage is not actually just a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing but ultimately is a display of character, an accumulation of traits and beliefs, training and patterns of behaviour that have been developed and exercised over the long span of life preparing one to act courageously in any given moment.

There is a second kind of courage as well. This one displayed not simply in a single moment or act but in anticipating a significant, daunting or even frightening challenge and not turning away from it but rather meeting it head on. This is also a matter of character – character that has emerged from a lifetime of facing fears and shouldering burdens and that is also being forged in the very moment of accepting challenges and responsibilities one could avoid.

It is this second kind of courage Jesus displays in our Gospel reading this week. The Pharisees come out to warn Jesus to bypass Jerusalem because Herod wants him dead. We don't know who these Pharisees were, maybe Nicodemus? But Jesus must have had allies if not supporters, who didn't want to see him dead or maybe didn't want Herod to appear to have more power. But Jesus refuses. Instead he will stick to his plan to go to Jerusalem like so many prophets before him. Even though he knew it meant death. This commitment to embrace his dark and difficult destiny for the sake of the world is the very embodiment of the second type of courage.

Jesus displayed this steadfastness before. But on this occasion we see the critical role that vulnerability plays in this kind of courage. To anticipate challenge and suffering and not look away is, by definition, to make oneself vulnerable for the sake of others.

As a culture we don't often equate vulnerability with courage and strength. With care, love and concern perhaps, but not often with courage and strength. At our worst we see vulnerability as a sign of weakness, something to be avoided at all costs. Our political and business leaders rarely display any signs of candour or personal sensitivity. To be seen as a strong leader they need to be tough, uncompromising even bullying. Yet if their minders feel they need a "softer" image they will go on TV and joke and get "talked into" doing a dance or playing a game to make them seem "human". At our best we recognise the need to be vulnerable to those we care about most deeply. But we don't often see vulnerability as essential to living a courageous life.

Here we see Jesus demonstrating that vulnerability is essential to courage, stands at the core of the Christian life and invites us to discover the peculiar strength of being open to the needs of those around us. Jesus chooses the image of the hen gathering her brood of chicks to her for protection and safety. Could there be a more vulnerable image? Could there be a more tender image? Could there be a better image to show that gender is neither relevant nor appropriate when speaking of the divine? Parents know there is no way you can protect

your children from all the threats and dangers life presents so that leaves parents profoundly vulnerable and promises a level of suffering that you simply would not endure for anyone else. Someone once said that a parent is only as happy as her or his least happy child.

This is precisely the level of vulnerability Jesus displays. Through Jesus God becomes vulnerable to all the vicissitudes of human life by becoming human through Incarnation. Jesus' choice of this image helps to realise that it is our vulnerability that spurs us on to courageous feats that we do for those we love but we would not do for ourselves. And so Jesus continues on to Jerusalem not to prove himself fearless or a hero, not to make a sacrifice for sin to appease a judgemental God, not even to combat the devil. Rather Jesus marches to Jerusalem and embraces the cross that awaits him there out of profound love for all people, a mother's fierce love that will stop at nothing for the sake of her children. The word "courage" comes from the Latin root *cor* – heart. So courage is living from the heart, the willingness to embrace our vulnerability in order to be our authentic selves. Christian courage, then, might be the kind of whole-hearted living that comes from believing that, as God's children, we are enough and that those around us are also God's children and therefore deserve our love, empathy and respect.

Where do you feel most vulnerable? Is it a relationship? Health? Finances? Low self-esteem? The message for you is that God protects you as a hen protects her chicks. God loves you and wants what's best for you. To be vulnerable is a courageous thing. From manger to cross God's vulnerability is seen. AMEN
