Sermon at St Mary's and St Andrew's on Sunday 20 March
by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Isaiah 55. 8-13 & Luke 13. 31-35

Wings outstretched

More often arch-rivals of Jesus, oddly it's a group of Pharisees who warn him that his life's in danger. The death threat is from none other than Herod, son of his namesake who'd tried and failed to exterminate Jesus at birth. In response, Jesus fearlessly and publically insults this puppet king, branding him a 'fox'. 'Tell that fox', he says, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people, today, tomorrow and the next day.' In other words, 'I'm going nowhere; my work is here'.

Brave, perhaps foolish words. You see, Herod was an unpredictable and dangerous tyrant. It was him, after all, who'd beheaded John the Baptist at the whim of his step-daughter.

This is a defiant Jesus who has nothing to lose because he'd looked death in the face. His words sit alongside those spoken by President Zelensky in recent weeks and other brave leaders who've stood up to tyrants throughout history.

And then defiance turns to lament: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I've longed to gather your children as a mother hen gathers her chicks… but you weren't willing'.

A hen and a fox. More of that later.

In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus weeps over a 'desolate' Jerusalem. Again, so poignant as the world looks on and weeps for the ruined cities of Ukraine.

That moment in Jesus' life has since been commemorated by a tear-shaped church called 'Dominus Flavit' (the Lord wept). Here, a window behind the altar overlooks the same vista that reduced Jesus to tears. And on that altar-front is a mosaic of a mother hen. Not the lion of Judah, not some mighty eagle, but a barnyard chicken with outstretched wings gathering in her wayward chicks.

In contrast, Jesus branded Herod a fox, a predator preying upon the weak and vulnerable. Barbara Brown Taylor writes: 'Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.'

In a blog called The Religious Imagineer, the writer says: 'Self-offering for the sake of others, however costly, is the divine way'.

They go on to say: 'Jesus… did this in his life and teaching, he did it on Calvary's hill. The hen's outstretched wings are like the arms of Jesus on the cross, still trying to gather us in with his last breath. "Father, forgive them," he prays. Even as he's dying… Jesus is trying to gather God's children and bring them home'.

The writer recalls a scene from Zefferelli's 1977 film, Jesus of Nazareth: 'Mary, the mother of Jesus, is allowed by a centurion to pass through security to approach her dying son. Then Mary Magdalene tries to follow, but the centurion stops her. "Please," says Magdalene. "I'm one of the family."

Hearing this, the mother of Jesus turns around sharply, clearly stung by the impudence of this outsider, this woman of questionable reputation, pretending to be related to Jesus. We imagine her thinking, "How dare she try to intrude on our intimate circle!" The centurion asks Mary, "Is she family?" And at that moment, the mother of Jesus has to decide whether she's going to be tribal and exclusive, or whether she is willing to embrace the welcoming way of her son.

After a brief hesitation, she nods, but it's not easy for her. "Yes," she says. "She is one of the family." And at that moment, at the foot of the cross, beneath Christ's outstretched wings, the welcoming and sheltering community of mutual and unconditional love is born into the world'.

'The welcoming, sheltering community of mutual and unconditional love'. Is there a better description of what Church could be?

Over these past weeks we've seen communities across Europe reach out to shelter and welcome the most vulnerable and traumatised. Our own government and Diocese are working on ways to offer hospitality and support to those fleeing Ukraine, and we'll keep you posted on how we as Hertford churches plan to respond.

In this war we have seen both the worst and the best of humanity. We've seen extreme courage both from Ukrainian politicians and Russian journalists. And always, always we must guard against making heroes of one nation and villains of another. Make no mistake; this is Putin's war, not Russia's.

So, pray with me for a profound change of heart within this complicated man, and for courage for each one who today would stretch out their wings to protect the innocent and the vulnerable… and the truth.

I wonder if you've personally witnessed or experienced the bullying of the vulnerable? Bullying comes dressed as many things; as sticks and stone; as bureaucracy or banter; as gossip or censorship. Always it's born of insecurity and fear.

In those moments when we've witnessed the bullying of others, have we, like the fox, secretly fed off it, or condoned it perhaps through our silence or failure to stand between it and its victim? Or have we with Jesus dared to cast out that particular demon, today, tomorrow and the next day by naming it and shielding the victim like a mother hen would?

When Jesus chose not to flee the threat of Herod, when he chose to stay in that heartbreak of Jerusalem, when he wept alongside every other tear shed then and since, when he walked willingly towards his own death, when he stretched out his wings on the cross; he was standing with every victim, he was challenging every bully, he was releasing into the world a hope; a hope defiant, hope despite, hope regardless.

We stand on the other side of his crucifixion. We know that it wasn't the end. Today as our world endures the endless senseless crucifixions of torture and injustice and airstrikes and hunger, we choose to stand with the victim; we choose the hope of resurrection; we choose to trust that always, always truth is stronger than lies, and light stronger than darkness and hope stronger than despair and love; love stronger than anything.