

# St. Matthew's Church

## NEW YORK CITY

### **THE FIERCENESS OF CHRIST** **Luke 13:22-35** **Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2010**

In our Gospel reading from Luke, the writer leaves no doubt about the Pharisees' dislike for Jesus. Jesus' pronouncement of six woes, three on the Pharisees and three on their friends the scribes as recorded in chapter 11, rendered them implacable enemies. As a result, "the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose Him fiercely and to besiege Him with questions, waiting to catch Him in something he might say." They wanted to get Jesus!

When you're up to your neck in alligators, it's hard to remember you came there to drain the swamp." How does one stay focused under maximum-stress conditions? Since we have a bloodhound's instinct for the trivial, the irrelevant, the extraneous, the passing, the ephemeral, how do we focus on the pearl of great price?

When the God fearing Jeremiah prophesied against Jerusalem because of its wickedness; The Jerusalemites snap back, "You are not supposed to do that here." Jerusalem was sacred, beyond criticism, off-base to a prophet's rantings, never mind the truth. "We are Americans," No criticism allowed. "We go to church regularly." No criticism allowed. Because these criticisms may not be gracious, or may violate protocol, or may be offensive, their truth often goes begging. The intensity of the criticism gives us permission to look anywhere except to the truth of the criticism.

The first question Christ always ask, "Is it true?" All others are secondary. Christ will not retreat to the secondary, to procedural questions, to traditional ways of doing things, when they blunt or block the truth. Even if the truth means death, even His own death, as indeed it did. Christ will not retreat from it.

Jesus did nothing to soften their ire. In fact, he immediately warned His disciples, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is

hypocrisy.” In Jesus’ estimation they were swollen carriers of hypocrisy who passed on their poison to their followers. So when some Pharisees came to Jesus with what appeared to be friendly advice (“Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.”). Jesus was not fooled. He was the gentle Lamb of God, but even a lamb is suspicious of wolves when they feign concern for its safety. Jesus knew there was collusion between His enemies. Herod had already been politically damaged by his murder of John the Baptist, and he did not want another such blotch on his record. So he used the Pharisees to pass on the threat to Jesus, hoping he would be frightened into going south to Judea. And the Pharisees liked Herod’s ploy because if Jesus could be manipulate into traveling to Judea, he would fall to the powerful Sanhedrin.

**Jesus’ Message To His Enemies:** *“Go tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must journey today, tomorrow, and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem.’”* (Luke 13:32-33). Although Jesus calls Herod a “fox” because of that ruler’s craftiness, rabbinic literature uses “fox” to describe a man as “meaningless” or “insignificant.” “Today and tomorrow and the third day” means that God’s timetable is unfolding for Jesus, and no king like Herod could shorten the time. His death and resurrection will be its perfection.

**To Herod:** Significantly. Herod is the only individual whom Jesus is recorded as treating with contempt. Later when Jesus stood before Herod, the Lord would say nothing to him at all, again showing contempt for him. Dr. L. Morris says; “When Jesus has nothing to say to a man that man’s position is hopeless.” Herod was a dead man in every way.

Jesus continues to show disdain by His answer: “I will drive out demons and heal people [I will continue to do my normal ministry] today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal [I will carry on my ministry for a short time and then I will be finished]. To Herod this meant that Jesus would do what he set out to do at his own pace and his own schedule until he was finished, despite Herod’s attempts at manipulation. In the wider context of Luke’s Gospel, this was a cryptic reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection being under divine control. King Jesus had addressed Herod, the petty monarch, with regal contempt and kingly confidence. This was sovereign premeditation! As the Lord said on another occasion when he affirmed that he would lay down his life for this sheep. “No one takes it

from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.” (John 10:18).

**To the Pharisees:** Having aggressively answered Herod, Jesus’ corresponding answer to the Pharisees was even sharper: “In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day; for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem.” If he is going to be killed, he chooses the time and place. “I must be on my way.” The place is Jerusalem. For the people, Jerusalem is the city of cities, the holy of holies, the place of God’s abode, the temple where God dwells. Jerusalem represented all that is good and true about Abraham and his descendants.

But through the eyes of Jesus, there is another Jerusalem. He saw a sad Jerusalem that saddened him, forcing him to speak the truth about Jerusalem. Jerusalem killed prophets. Jerusalem stoned people whom God had sent to serve and to rescue. Who likes to say anything harsh about the beloved, no matter how true? Christ cares very much. No one cares more than Christ. “I must be on the way” to that prophet-killing, messenger-stoning city, precisely because it does kill prophets and does stone God’s messengers. They are about to kill one more.

We can’t realize how scandalous it was for Christ to say what he did about Jerusalem, the city that saw itself as the center of religious propriety but was actually deceiving people in the name of religious propriety. They were scrutinizing the faith of others when they have no faith. Dealing with the outsiders of holy things had made Jerusalem what it was and what it had become, mostly unbeknownst to itself, so deeply had it hidden from itself. It worshiped God and in the name of God killed the prophets and messengers of Yahweh. It was about to do so again. In the name of God, Jerusalem destroyed the holy one of God.

**Jesus Message to His People:** Jesus had answered Herod and the proud Pharisees with royal disdain and irony. And the mention of his death in Jerusalem turned his thoughts to his people, represented by Jerusalem. So over looking Jerusalem he makes this statement: *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”* Jesus expressed his desire for his people with a magnificent image, that of a mother bird brooding over her young in the nest. The emphasis on “her wings” reminds us of the first use

of this image in Scripture in the Song of Moses when he celebrated God's care for Jacob: *"In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions."* (Deuteronomy 32:10-11). The picture of an eagle spreading her vast wings in protection, and even scooping fallen chicks from the air and carrying them aloft to safety, is instructive and encouraging. Tucked under his wings, one finds sustenance, warmth, and security. This is not a sentimental image. This is what Jesus longs to do for us. It is a metaphor divinely chosen to convey God's longing in Christ for his people. Have you allowed him to tuck you snugly under his wings?

Jesus is the hero of our souls. He fully understood what lay ahead and faced it fully as every step took him closer to death. Jesus was determined to die for our sins. He would not be deterred. He died for us because he chose to do so. This rocklike determination was grounded on his tender love. God incarnate tenderly longed to pull his people to himself, under his wings. This is what God wants to do and can do for you and me.

Unwilling people are under his judgment. But the gospel goes out to them again and again and again. And those who respond will cry at the Second Advent, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." He has done everything. All you need to do is believe and be willing.