

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

We often have a very simplistic view of the people and groups with which Jesus dealt. The Pharisees, for example, are often considered the “bad guys” of the gospel story as it seems that Jesus is in constant tension with them.

The truth is far more nuanced. There were a wide variety of beliefs and practices among the Pharisees. While they shared the belief that Israel was to be a holy people; a nation of priests, how that role was to be carried out was the subject of bitter divisions. The Pharisees were divided into various “schools”, each of which was founded by a different rabbi or “teacher”. The largest of these were the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai. Hillel and Shammai were both influential rabbis of the first century B.C.

Many of Hillel’s teachings sound familiar to us: “Do not do what is hateful to your neighbor. This is the whole of the Law, the rest is commentary.” “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” He also taught that healing on the Sabbath was not a sin but having the power to heal and failing to do so on the Sabbath was a great sin. It was almost certainly Pharisees of the Hillelian School who came to Jesus to warn him about Herod.

The Herod referred to in this passage is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. At his father’s death, Antipas was given control of Galilee and of Perea, on the east bank of the Jordan River. It was this Herod who had John the Baptizer put to death. The warning that Antipas was looking for Jesus was not one to be taken lightly. It is on the same level as a warning that one was sought by the KGB in the Soviet Union or the Gestapo in the days of Nazi Germany. Jesus’ reply was audacious. In the first century, a “fox” referred to an enemy held in low regard. Not only did Jesus not fear Herod, he even insulted him.

Luke locates Jesus’ lament over the city of Jerusalem in two different settings. In addition to the words in this week’s text, Jesus speaks very similar words during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Luke 19: 41 - 44). In contrast, Matthew places it at the end of Jesus’ last public sermon during his final week in the holy city. Jesus’ statement that a prophet could only die in Jerusalem was not a statement of history (Jeremiah died in Egypt and Ezekiel died in Babylon) but concerned his own future. This prophet was on his way to Jerusalem fully aware of what lay ahead of him.