

Jn 20:19-31 Fullarton 240422

I learned very early in my previous career that to be effective, tchg must relate to the circumstances of the learner, drawing on experiences already familiar to them in their lives to build new learning. Isn't that how all life's learning works? And of course J too based his tchg very much on the circumstances of his listeners. He frequently used familiar images in his tchg of the parables & often these images were farming-based, since farming would have been familiar to all to whom he addressed his messages - a fruit tree, a seed of wheat, a farmer's field, a grapevine, sheep, even chickens! And why not, for most of Jesus' listeners would have been farmers themselves, or at least very familiar with farming. For a long time these illustrations which Jesus used to make his points would have worked without much thought or exploration.

Now, most of us have moved to cities & fewer of us grew up on farms, so we may miss the more subtle points in some of Jesus's stories. But I'm going to take a punt, using an image of Jesus that I hope at least some of you have directly experienced in your lives, the image of a mother hen & her chickens.

Now I would guess a few of you would have at some time had chooks at home in your backyard?

And especially if you lived in the country or on edge of the metro area I would imagine you would also at some time have had trouble with a fox in your chookhouse?

I well remember when we lived just outside Pt Turton on Yorke Pen we had a chook house with a few hens for eggs. Occasionally we would get a new hen with her batch of tiny chickens. And I noticed, especially in the early days, that when something alarmed the chicks, like a sudden loud noise, or I would imagine, a fox, they would run scurrying under mother hen, seemingly disappearing in a moment! It

was as if the chickens were running to the mother hen for protection. (Although I'm not sure how much protection the mum might have given her young brood from a hungry fox)/ But when the threat was gone, the chicks would emerge again, and the mother hen would return to what she was doing, most likely pecking her way around the chook house.

In the gospel for a few Sundays ago Jesus himself is the mother hen figure who longs to gather the people of Jerusalem to himself, especially under the threat of Herod 'the fox', the puppet ruler, a notoriously cruel ruthless despot, who is circling around Jesus 'the hen', and his brood of disciples. And Jesus will literally lay his body on the line for her chicks in the face of danger, when 'the fox' strikes. This indeed this was the fate that would befall Jesus on the first Good Friday which we celebrated just over a week ago

And Jesus brings the reassuring message of this image of the mother hen into the midst of the threats & dangers that we face in our complicated & dangerous world today; with the war in the Ukraine & other conflicts, an ongoing pandemic, & repeated natural disasters linked to climate change. And then of course there are the personal threats & suffering we may be dealing with in our own lives or the lives of our loved ones at this time.

These are indeed, anxious & fearful times for many.

So where is our Mother Hen God in all of this?

Today's gospel begins in an atmosphere of fear. It is Easter Sunday, 2 days after the death of Jesus. The disciples are inside the house, with the doors firmly locked, because they are terrified that, as companions of Jesus, they too will be arrested & punished. The words of assurance they had been given earlier are all forgotten. Then suddenly, there is Jesus, standing in their midst, but in a new way.

'Peace be with you!' is his greeting to them. It is the normal Jewish Greeting of 'Shalom', but coming from Jesus the resurrected Prince of Peace to this group of frightened people, it has special meaning. And in the Greek, there is no verb, so it can be taken either as a statement or a fact - where Jesus is truly present to us, there is peace. The disciples are anxious & fearful in the aftermath of the Good Friday cross, -and Jesus brings them the peace & joy of the Easter resurrection. Yet does the Risen Jesus take away the danger faced by the disciples here? Or is their fear of the ongoing threats dissolved or even diminished by Christ's presence?

The most frequent command of God in the Bible is 'Do not fear', a phrase that can be found over 150 times throughout the scriptures. Some have said that Jesus' words 'Do not fear' are an indictment of those who fear, as it signifies a less robust faith, & that if we truly have faith we should not be afraid in the face of life's dangers. Indeed a few have gone so far as to say fear is sinful! They have suggested that if we are faithful, God will protect us & stop bad things from happening to us! Or at least that if we are faithful, God will take our fear away! But do our scriptures say this?

Let's have another look at the Good Friday experience of our Lord- let us reflect once more on Jesus the sinless one, facing his inevitable crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating, crying, pleading for God to let the cup pass from him (Lk 22:41-44), questioning why his God had forsaken him. His destiny was set by the evil surrounding him- & in his humanity he would go to the cross in fear. So this is a God in Christ who knew & deeply experienced danger & fear.

Can you reflect on a time when you were anxious, fearful in the face of danger?

Has your faith always protected you & stopped bad things from happening to you? Did Jesus' words ' Do not fear', always stop you from being afraid? Perhaps they did. I believe God can intervene in these ways.

There have certainly been moments in my own life, & I know of others' experiences, where it is apparent that God has intervened. But this is not the universal experience. How then, should we understand Jesus' words?/

Well my experience has taught me that there are times when nothing keeps danger from being dangerous! When not even these words from Jesus will stop fear from being fear! Anxiety & fear are natural human responses to danger - fear steadies our impulses & warns us to take care. Fear is our God-given sentinel, warning us of possible harm.

So what then is the point of Jesus' story of the God Mother Hen?

A mother hen cannot actually keep a determined fox from killing her chicks. What good then, is this image of God as a Mother Hen, if faith in her cannot make us safe or at least stop us from feeling afraid?

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a pastor in the Lutheran church & an author, writing after the first outbreak of COVID in the USA, suggests that it's not a promise of safety that stops us from being afraid, but the peace of God's love, that comforting presence of knowing that we are not alone, which carries us through the fear, the sufferings & tribulations in the dangers that we will all face.

So while the Mother Hen God doesn't stop foxes from being dangerous our Mother Hen God changes how we experience the dangers & fears that are a part of being alive for all of us!

God the Mother Hen of God gathers all of her downy feathered, vulnerable little ones under God's protective wings so that we know

where we belong, because it's there that we find warmth & shelter in whatever we will all face in life.

Our faith in God may not bring us to safety, for the fox will still exist; the trials and the tribulations & the threats of life will still exist. Danger is not optional, & fear is a part of life. Most importantly the opposite of fear is not courage or bravery -the opposite of fear is love. So in the response to the very real dangers of this world, we have an invitation as people of faith: to know the peace of God's love & be comforted, indeed strengthened by God's Risen presence, as we journey through our afflictions & threats. God in fact liberates us from the power of fear, to live positively through the dangers.

God is not criticizing us for being afraid in a world haunted by so many terrors & traumas. And furthermore "Don't be afraid" is not a command not to fear, but rather the nurturing voice of God drawing near to our trembling. So as we hear these words we can imagine God in all tenderness cradling us & all creation against her breast.

Yet God's message does not end here, with (to quote the words of our Sunday liturgy) the disciples knowing this 'peace of love that surpasses all understanding', for we in turn are to 'go in peace, to love & serve the Lord'.

Having shown his disciples the wounds in his hands & his side, evidence that he has endured the suffering of the cross, the power of the disciples' fear is transformed by the return of their Master, the Risen Christ & his greeting of peace on this Easter Day, into an energy for them to be agents of change, as he gives them their mission in the words: 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you'.

And of course in sending his first disciples, J sends us, as individual believers & as his church family of Chad's, to share God's love, in bringing his peace & justice to all who live in fear & to restore the

integrity of all creation. It is a big task - for it involves working to create a whole society based on right relationships with God, with each other, between all people & with all the rest of creation. It is the making of the Kingdom of God!

On Monday, as we celebrate Anzac Day, & remember the sacrifice of those who have died & suffered life-changing injuries in defending our peace & justice, let us also resolve anew, to do all we can to bring the justice & peace of God's Kingdom to all who face fear, in our communities, our nation & our world.