



Archbishop Stephen reflects on Luke 13.31-35 for the Second Sunday of Lent, 16 March 2025.

The text of the reflection follows in full:

St Luke's Gospel, chapter 13 and verse 34, Jesus said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often have I desired to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

Lamenting all the many ways in which Jesus cries out with longing, the sort of longing that all of us know when we are in danger or difficulty and simply yearn to gather together those we love and keep them safe. For Jesus himself comes as the one promised by God, whose sacred task is to gather all people together in himself and, in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, create in himself one new humanity, thus making peace. But he is also acknowledging the cost of this vocation. Jerusalem is the place that has killed those who were sent to it.

Maternal images for God are relatively rare in scripture, and even in the Church today. But this is one of those instances where Jesus himself reaches for maternal language to describe the longing in his heart. He has become, in this moment, the embodiment of the God who is the eternal, loving parent, and therefore he describes himself as a mother hen who wants only to protect and gather together her brood.

Of course, we know that God is neither male nor female, and of course, most of our language for God uses the word 'father'. But we also know that God is both father and mother. As Mother Julian of Norwich put it, 'God chose to be our mother in all things, that just as our mothers bear us for pain and for death, our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.'

And Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, at the very end of the 11th century and one of the Church's greatest theologians, wrote, 'Jesus, like a mother, you gather your people to you. You are gentle with us, as a mother with her children.'

The great English painter Stanley Spencer, in one of his portraits of Christ in the wilderness, chose this text for one of his paintings (see below). In it, we see the mother hen gathering together her chicks, but the mother hen is herself encircled by Jesus. He is the one who gathers us together. He is the one who holds us together. He is the one in whom we find security, safety, rest and peace.

In the world, we will face all kinds of trials and torments, difficulties, challenges, and sometimes conflict and betrayal. But we are held safe, not because of our goodness and not because we have not failed, but because we are loved. And that the God who is both mother and father gathers us together like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wing.

And finally, isn't this an image we find over and over again in scripture, and particularly in the Psalms? 'Hide me under the shadow of your wing,' says Psalm 17. 'In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,' says Psalm 57. 'Until the destroying storms pass by, in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy,' says Psalm 63. It is the place, says Psalm 35, where all people find refuge.



"Christ in the Wilderness - The Hen", Stanley Spencer c. 1954,
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.

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