Serpents and Doves

June 28th, 2020

Last week, in our reading of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we considered what it means to be like sparrows, to be trusting in the provision of the Lord, to be thankful for the great value that God has placed on us, and to be generous with our hearts in every way. Today, we return to the same chapter to revisit other verses from this challenging discourse. Once again, Jesus brings us into the world of animal imagery and analogy: “‘See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). This advice comes against a backdrop of persecution, violence, and social unrest, which would destroy the nation only four decades from the time Jesus was speaking: “Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matthew 10:17:23). The first image is clear enough—Jesus addresses the vulnerability of the believer who is like a sheep among wolves. Jesus has used animal images before—wolves and sheep in the Gospel of Matthew, when warning his followers about dangerous teachers: “‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:15-20). The world is the terrain of the wolves, and believers are not to be like wolves, they are to be sheep. What follows today, however, is completely puzzling, because Jesus moves on from sheep and wolves to say *Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

Animal analogies and tales are some of the oldest forms of wisdom in the earth, as I have mentioned before. In past sermons, I have mentioned Aesop fables from the Hellenic world, the Anansi stories from Africa, the Jataka and Panchantantra stories from India, and so on. In the middle ages, these forms continued in the *Reynard the Fox* stories. Stephen Greenblatt writes, “Animal stories generally tend to work in two basic ways: they suggest either that animals are like humans, or that humans are like animals” (“Introduction” *Reynard the Fox*. Tr. James Simpson, New York: Liveright Publishing, 2015, 22). Reynard the Fox is a trickster who is not innocent but incredibly clever; his misadventures hold up a mirror to a society rife with injustice. As Greenblatt observes: “Before we can really appreciate our trickster’s genius, however, we need to see that the victims are often also *themselves* predators. They are, in fact, no less predatory than the obvious predator, even if they are infinitely less clever, and even if they hypocritically dress their predations up as law, learning, and religion. Their predations are often, in fact, plain brutal. The victims are greedy, obtuse, hypocritical, and often cruel. So the predator fox becomes a hero, or antihero of sorts, since he’s wonderfully clever, makes no claim to moral superiority, and for the most part cheats only stupid, greedy, predatory, and often brutal hypocrites. Not only that, but he cheats them repeatedly, since their readiness to fall victim to greed is infinite. The Reynard-centered, beast-epic stories prompt us, that is, to scrutinize the solidity of the ‘civilized’ order. For once that order has been created by animals, we cannot help but see through its pretensions, since most animals, and certainly the big ones who make the rules (like us, for example), are often predators and carnivores” (24). Ironically, when complaining about the injustice of society, Asaph repents of his complaint and calls himself an animal instead of painting society as a bestiary: “When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast towards you” (Psalm 73:21-22). Jesus confuses us even more. Instead of working in the usual categories and tropes, he tells us to be two different animals at once. Charles Hedrick has demonstrated that in the ancient Mediterranean, the serpent is always deceptive; and in the common idiom, the pigeon symbolized the victim of deceptions, frauds, and scams—the victim of serpents. Thus, “‘Be sly as snakes and simple as pigeons’ is therefore a paradox—an oxymoron and hence it is self-contradictory. Each half of the saying contradicts the other. If you are shrewd and cunning, you are not naïve and simple” (Charles W. Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables: Jesus and His Modern Critics.* Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. Viii). It is an enigma.

*Be wise as serpents.* John Piper says: “vulnerability, not stupidity, is the point of calling us sheep. Be like snakes, not sheep, when it comes to being smart. I take that to mean that snakes are quick to get out of the way. They go under rocks. So, yes, go among wolves and be vulnerable as you preach the gospel, but when they lunge at you, step aside. When they open their mouths, don’t jump in. And not only that, be as innocent as doves. That is, don’t give them any legitimate reason to accuse you of injustice or immorality. Keep your reputation as clean as you can. So both the snake-intelligence and the dove-innocence are both designed to keep the sheep out of trouble. Jesus does not mean for us to get ourselves into as much difficulty as possible. He means: Risk your lives as vulnerable, non-combative, sheep-like, courageous witnesses, but try to find ways to give your witness in a way that does not bring down unnecessary persecution” (“Sheep, Wolves, Snakes and Doves”, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/sheep-wolves-snakes-and-doves>). Jesus’s statement that the disciples should flee from town to town (Matthew 10:23) seems to confirm this interpretation to some extent.

*Be as innocent as doves.* Another possible interpretation is that one should know the ways of the serpent while living as a dove. Know the tricks of the fox but do not be like the fox (*contra* Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*). Cultivate prudence and wisdom, especially Biblical wisdom, but also cultivate innocence and purity in all of its ways—be innocent and blameless and have a clean conscience. This is practically and spiritually beneficial. There is a good kind of innocence and an evil kind of naiveté. Evil naiveté is the kind of stupid optimism that recklessly ignores dangers and imagines, alongside Gottfried Leibniz, that this is the best of all possible worlds (cf. *Candide* by Voltaire). It is also the kind of naiveté that imagines this is the worst of all possible worlds but we are capable of creating the perfect world we want. Some of the worst disasters in history were perpetrated by idealists who wanted to make a better world. Our world is neither heaven nor hell, we live neither in yesterday nor tomorrow, and we should think and behave accordingly. The end never justifies the means because the end is not ours to define or realize. That belongs to God, for the end is God. Any end that is not God, who is love, is only going to lead to conflict and sorrow. In order to walk with God we must walk before Him and be blameless (Genesis 17:1). That requires walking grace and in what is commanded by grace—to cultivate beatitude, to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, self-control. Against such things there is no law, and thus, no blame (Galatians 5:16-26). Be wisely good, be stupidly good—but be good regardless. We do not become better followers of Christ by changing society; we change society by becoming better followers of Christ, by entering the kingdom like innocent children (Matthew 19:14), cautious with others but trusting of our heavenly God and Father.

Our natural history and human history are full of conflict, but through Christ we are promised peace. A follower of Christ believes that the loving God indeed saves humans and animals from their plight (Psalm 36:5-6), that nature has indeed been subjected to a temporary futility and frustration to bring about the glorious love and redemption of God that will heal us of all adversities (Romans 8). And when prophesying and warning his disciples about the coming social disturbances, perhaps Jesus is also looking back to the prophets, who frequently used animal imagery. In the judgmental prophecies, the animal imagery is very negative. In the Messianic prophecies, the imagery is hopeful, harmonious and peaceful:

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,

and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,

the spirit of counsel and might,

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

….

The wolf shall live with the lamb,

the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,

and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,

their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.

They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 11:1-9

In the end, it may be just be that the paradox is only understood through experience, through enduring the hardship of really living the gospel in an absurd and hostile world. The world is not merciful, but Christ is mercy Himself, and peace will come only when the earth if full of the knowledge of the Lord, as waters cover the sea.