I tried a small experiment before writing this sermon, I decided I would put myself in Saint Patrick’s shoes and see how he might have preached on this powerful but complicated text of Luke. I could have chosen Saint Basil whose love of animals and sermons about them are wonderfully enlightening, but I chose the saint of the day! The one thing we can surmise about Patrick the Enlightener is that he was fairly direct in his speech, blunt almost, at least that’s the glimpse we get from his Confessions. I love his opening sentence: 

"My name is Patrick. I am a sinner, a simple country person, and the least of all believers. I am looked down upon by many!"

I can thoroughly identify with that, so I feel he would have gone straight to the metaphors of Fox and Hen, not because they are easy images, but because on them hangs a particular vision of salvation in Christ.

So, what about the Fox? I know that we place heavy burdens on people and animals by labels we attach to them, and poor old Fox has suffered grievously through time. But in this passage I don’t think Jesus is denigrating the animal, he is using a familiar comparison; Herod is worthless, a petty princeling, a ‘small fry ruler,’ a little fox, compared to real rulers who are lions. So Jesus is saying that he will not flee from Herod nor allow the Pharisees to dissuade him from his destiny in Jerusalem. Why? Because he has his mission to complete; “today and tomorrow, and the third day I complete my mission” (v. 32). That’s the way forward, Jerusalem, not into Herod’s clutches. Jesus also hints that this way, his way, ends not only in death but in his rising and coming again: “I tell you, you will not see me, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (v. 35b). This isn’t a Palm Sunday prophecy. Remember, by the time this Gospel was written Jerusalem had been ransacked, the Temple torn down. We look not only to Golgotha but beyond to the Parousia, to the return of the great High King of Heaven.

I suspect Patrick would have rehabilitated the Fox, showing us that craftiness and cunning redeemed in Christ becomes persistence and faithfulness. Like Patrick and Herod, I too am small fry, I too am a fox. So one question to ask of myself this Lent, in a
messy tortured world, is how do I go beyond my failings, become less the crafty, cunning, fox of a sinful world and become more like the persistent friend of Christ, the Fox that in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince, becomes part of hope; “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye," a message that calls us to look both beyond ourselves and into our hearts. Those are true words for us as we follow the Fox alongside Christ on the royal road of the Gospel, for they challenge us to persistent responsibility and care for others as true disciples of the Faithful One!

So now to the image of the brooding hen! For me this is a hugely powerful image about a Christ who is desperate to care for me, who wants to protect, gather, comfort me under the shelter of his wings; but it’s also an ambivalent image because we hijack it, usually to point out the gentle ‘mothering’ image of Jesus, but that’s not new, that image comes up in other contexts, in Scripture and in the spiritual tradition of Christianity, but there is another side to this, so hold on, ask this question: who amongst us likes a Mother Hen? Why? They are overprotective, interfering, overbearing. They cluck and pick and watch constantly! Is that the image of Jesus we want? Why not?

I can go with it, because pushing the metaphor a little harder, I can think of times when I really want to be protected, cared for, or fussed over, when I will matter to somebody, in times when I am vulnerable and wounded, maltreated and lost! How much more will those who have been abandoned, neglected, ostracised or never had a mother be glad of that fuss and attention? Seen in this way it becomes a wonderful metaphor, not only for Christ but our own Christ-like vocation, to ‘fuss-in-love’ over others: but I'll push that image even further, recent studies show mother hens are hugely attentive, caring parents, so much so that they ‘feel’ their chicks’ pain. In experiments, hens showed signs of anxiety when their chickens were in distress. “[They] found that adult female birds possess at least one of the essential underpinning attributes of empathy – the ability to be affected by, and share, the emotional state of another.” Isn’t that precisely part of the great commandment, to take on ourselves the empathy of God?

Now there’s the thing, Patrick I am sure would have woven the two metaphors together, the redeemed Fox, persistent, faithful, doggedly carrying on - and the Mother Hen, reaching out to all as Christ does, irrespective of who we are, the living reality of the empathy of God, which knows no boundaries! In Luke’s story, Jesus calls out in an anguished way, that ‘Jerusalem!, Jerusalem!’, to those he loves and wants to belong with him, but who refuse to listen and go away.
Am I like that? Or can I hear and sense that love of God accepting me as a mother hen does her brood, who forgives me time and time again? Will I let Christ be my ‘Mother’ too, and shelter under his wings, so I may share and work in that empathy of God? Pope Francis put it like this when preaching on the same text: ‘Even the one who is the most wicked, the worst blasphemer, is loved by God with the tenderness of…to use Jesus’ words, “a hen with her brood”’.

Can I share that empathy with others? Turn the world upside down?

That is the question I came to see is mine, the one I leave with you to discern

I end with the voice of Patrick speaking to us all: *That is why I cannot be silent – nor would it be good to do so – about such great blessings and such a gift that the Lord so kindly bestowed in the land of my captivity. This is how we can repay such blessings, when our lives change and we come to know God, to praise and bear witness to his great wonders before every nation under heaven.*

May it be so,

Amen, Amen.