

Recently, Renee and I have been binge watching the ABC TV series, *Scandal*. If you're not familiar with the show, it's centers on all sorts of fictional political intrigue in Washington DC. We've now gone through six-and-a-half seasons of deception and domination, backroom deals and back-stabbing, affairs of state and more illicit affairs. The characters in the show are hungry for political power, and they'll use the most Machiavellian means to acquire it.

On the other hand, I recently watched the old Tom Hanks movie, *Forrest Gump*. Forrest Gump is the polar opposite of the power-hungry characters in *Scandal*. Forrest Gump is not very bright. He is naïve and simple. He flutters through life like a feather in a breeze. And yet, through a series of amazing coincidences, his life intersects over and over again with great historical figures and events.

Forrest Gump and the politicians on *Scandal*. In many ways they are polar opposites. And yet, Jesus tells us in our Gospel today, that we need to emulate aspects of both of them. He says, "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

It's a paradoxical statement that I want to unpack. "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

But first I want to step back and look at the bigger picture. Today is the day every year when we celebrate our patron saint, St. Paul. Paul was the great missionary who took the message of Christianity from the ancient Jewish world out into the larger Greco-Roman world.

Because the focus is on St. Paul, the readings for his feast day were designated with him in mind. Since Paul is the great missionary, the Gospel reading appointed for today is from that section of Matthew where Jesus is sending his disciples out to do missionary work.

He first gives them instructions about how they are to do missionary work. Then Jesus warns his followers about the difficulties they can expect. That's where our section begins today. Jesus describes things that Paul would later encounter: being persecuted, being arrested, being flogged, being put on trial, even being put to death. These are all things that would happen to Paul during his ministry. But the opening statement of the section is this:

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."¹

It's quite the menagerie in this verse: sheep, wolves, serpents, doves.

What's the meaning here?

Well, first off, Jesus is not promising that things are going to be easy. The world can be dangerous. His followers are going out as sheep into the midst of wolves.

Jesus knows that the world is not some happy fantasy-land. There are predators out there. There are difficulties that his followers will experience.

¹ Mt 10:16

In response to such dangers, there are two natural human responses: fight or flight.

Fight or flight. At times, throughout Christian history, Christians have chosen one or the other.

Fight. There's an old 1965 movie, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. It's about the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Charlton Heston stars as Michelangelo. And Rex Harrison plays Pope Julius II. The movie begins with a battle scene. A knight in armor is hacking his way through the opposition. Then he and his army ride into town as conquerors. He takes off his helmet. And they put papal vestments over his armor. And then Pope Julius, in both armor and a white cope, proceeds to bless the soldiers and the people.

That's an extreme example. But there are plenty of times when Christians have taken on the characteristics of the wolf. They have chosen to fight. They have chosen the way of tooth and claw. The crusades, the inquisition. Trading slaves. Executing heretics. Persecuting others. There plenty of times in our history when Christians have acted like wolves in the midst of other wolves. There are plenty of times when we have failed miserably to be the flock of our Good Shepherd.

Yes, these are extreme examples. But sometimes our wolf-like behavior comes out in more ordinary ways.

One pastor told me this story. He had gone out to eat lunch with his family on a Sunday afternoon after church. At the restaurant, a few tables away, a waitress accidentally dropped a salad into the lap of one of the customers, getting salad dressing all over the man's suit. She was very apologetic. But the guy was livid. He screamed at her about how stupid she was, how incompetent she was. And did she know how much his suit cost? Probably worth more than she made in a month. Red faced, hurling insults, really letting have it.

And the pastor said he realized: "This guy is in a suit on a Sunday afternoon. Who wears a suit to lunch on Sunday? Probably someone who's just come from church." Youch.

Yes, sometimes we Christians do behave like wolves.

We claw. We bite. We fight.

But sometimes, instead of fight we choose flight. We just bail out. In Christian history there have been times when different groups have chosen to opt out of society. There have been times when Christians have basically said, "Like sheep into the midst of wolves?" No thanks. We'll hide out. We'll go off somewhere far away and form our little safe enclave. We'll escape from the wolves.

Or we'll lie low. We'll drop off the radar screen. We'll take care of ourselves, and take care of our own, and the rest of the world can destroy itself—we'll hunker down, we'll ride it out, we'll be safe.

We hide. We avoid. We take flight.

Jesus says, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves." And we all too often choose to run away from the wolves, or to act like wolves ourselves. Flight or fight. Those are natural human reactions.

And yet Jesus is asking something different of us.

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

Wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Go out as sheep into the midst of wolves. But be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

So what is this about? What kind of snake/bird/sheep hybrid is Jesus expecting us to be?

He sends us out into a dangerous world to be agents and vessels of his love. He knows there are wolves out there.

So he says we need to be wise as serpents. Snakes in his culture were regarded as shrewd and cunning. Snakes were wary and even sneaky. Snakes knew how the real world operated. Snakes were never naïve. You couldn't fool a snake.

So to be wise as serpents is to be attuned to the ways of the world, to be aware of all the hazards and traps and pitfalls that are out there.

But at the same time, Jesus says we are to be as innocent as doves. We are to exhibit the attributes of those who live in God's love, those who have received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is often symbolized by a dove.

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peace makers."² In Galatians, St. Paul says, "The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."³

Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Be snake-minded but dove-hearted.

You don't have to be some kind of naïve simpleton like a Forrest Gump. But you don't have to be some Machiavellian schemer like the cast of *Scandal*.

Be wise as serpents **and** innocent as doves. Yes, it's often easier to be one or the other. Yes, it is hard to do both. But we need both.

² Mt 5:7-9

³ Gal 5:22-23

One of our great Biblical scholars says, "Without innocence, shrewdness becomes manipulative. Without shrewdness, innocence becomes naiveté."⁴

We need both. Jesus sends us to live in the real world, to serve him in the real world. Our eyes need to be open. Our minds need to be working. And we don't need to be oblivious, or naïve.

But we can't be paralyzed by fearfulness. "I am sending you out as sheep into the midst of wolves." But then in the rest of the speech, Jesus says 4 times either "do not fear" or "do not be afraid."

Live in the real world, but live without fear. St. Paul certainly lived that way. He went out into a dangerous world. He was beaten. He was imprisoned. He was kicked out of one town after another. And he was eventually executed.

He didn't turn off his brilliant mind. He knew how the real world operated.

But at the same time, he sought more and more to have the mind of Christ. In Romans he wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."⁵ Be as wise as serpents, but also be as innocent as doves.

That was a lesson he had learned. That was a lesson he lived out. That was a lesson he taught. He said it this way:

"I want you to be wise about what is good and innocent about what is evil."⁶

Love and serve God innocently and shrewdly.
Love God with your heart and your mind.
And love your neighbor as yourself.
Live in the real world, as real followers of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*

⁵ Rom 12:2

⁶ Rom 16:19