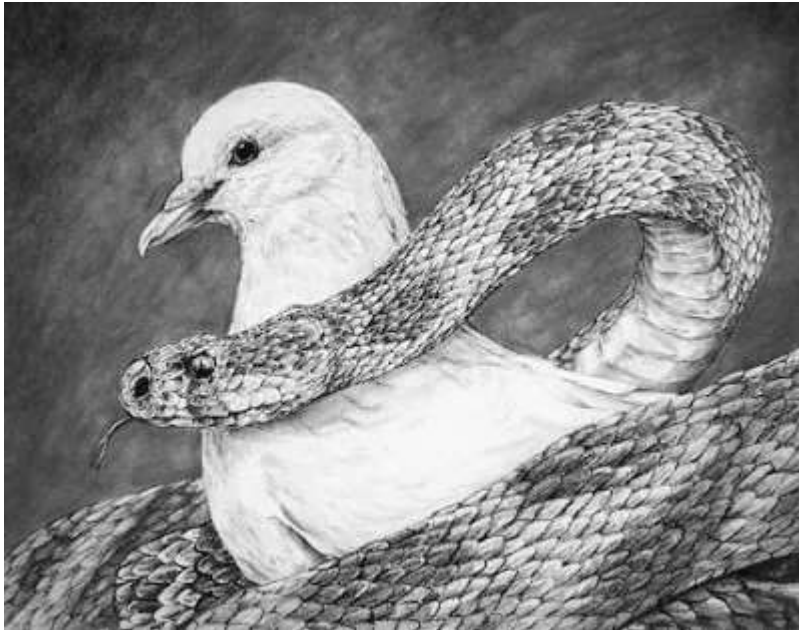




*... 16 Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.:*

Dear Brothers and Sisters

Jesus himself was known as the Lamb of God. *Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world.* (John 1:29) The generation he spoke to, was made up of Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, lawyers, priests, and then common people. The last – the common people, they heard Jesus gladly. (Mark 12:37) When Jesus saw them, he had compassion upon them, for they were as sheep that have no shepherd. (Matthew 9:36) The rest, Jesus noted them for their hypocrisy. They were false teachers. They corrupted the truth and prevented others for reaching it. – see Luke 11:52. This class can then be described in this way: *Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.* (Matthew 7:15)

So, when Jesus said to his disciples that he would be sending them forth as sheep into the midst of wolves, it was nothing that he hadn't already done himself, and continued to do. Moreover, those wolves disguised themselves, pretending to be sheep. It was very dangerous, for a sheep to be sent out. But if they stayed close to the shepherd, they would not have to fear the wolves, for the shepherd would be

their protection, even though the wolves were nearby. But if the sheep wandered off, or the flock became scattered, then they had beware as Paul advised in Acts 20: 29: *For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.* So although there was an imbalance, if they acted in a certain way, they would be safe.

Jesus described this behaviour as being *wise as serpents but harmless as doves*. Two more animals. As wolves are contrasted with sheep. So serpents and doves are also contrasted. But whereas there are no characteristics of the wolf that can be used to liken the faithful to, it seems that surprisingly there are characteristics of the serpent that are useful.

Jesus himself was identified with the dove. John testified: *I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.* (John 1:32) John said he saw this occur. The Holy Spirit was like a dove. Alighting gently, a symbol of freedom, of purity, of gentle calmness, and harmlessness. The word of God is intended to be just that, so no wonder John saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Jesus own personality reflected that. Jesus himself was a messenger of hope just like the dove that Noah sent out that returned with an olive leaf plucked off.

But apart from the common people who heard Jesus gladly, the wolf like rulers and leaders of the people were described as snakes. (Matthew 9:36) Jesus described them as a generation of vipers. (Luke 3:7) They were snakes in that they used pretence, and cunning crafty deception to try and trap Jesus. It is why Jesus said to them that they were of *their father the devil, who was a murderer there was no truth in him* – John 8:44.

So, what was it about serpents that Jesus said that his disciples should be like? Were there any traits of the unrighteous that can be useful? Jesus noted in his parable of the unjust steward Luke 16:8 *for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.*

The children of light, are as harmless as doves, they avoid the corruption of the world, and try even to avert their eyes from the offensive. They strive for perfection and purity through the forgiveness of sins. They shun and flee from temptation. But as observed by the prophet Isaiah 59:15 *he that departs from evil makes himself a prey* – a target for attack, the butt of every joke, an object of ridicule, something to be picked on, and like a wild bird or a dove put in a cage. Because soft, kind and gentle people do get taken advantage of. Generous people get taken for a ride. Hard working people get left to do all the work. Being naïve, inexperienced and too trusting, will only increase the pain, the burden, the trials of life which are hard enough.

Jesus, the Lamb-Dove when he knew he was being cornered, or an attempt to trap him, he used tools at his disposal to escape, and to protect himself. He knew their thoughts, he would pass by in their midst. He would counter their questions with another more crafty question. He would use scripture in such a skilful way, that left his accusers looking stupid. He used deftness and awareness, and a sensitivity in the same way that vipers feel vibrations through the ground, and quickly slide off to safety.

I am not sure it is wise to use the example of the serpent in the garden as an example of the wisdom of the serpent. In Genesis it is described as more subtle than any other animal (Genesis 3:1) This means to be cunning but in a bad sense. (See Strong's definition) The Apostle Paul teaches that this craftiness is something to be avoided in 2 Corinthians 11:3 *But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.*

Agur the son of Jakeh observed in Proverbs 30:18,19 that there were three things which were too wonderful for him to comprehend – one of which was the way of a serpent upon a rock... We may have all seen a serpent basking in the sun. It moves like lightning, so fast, it leaves no trace. One minute it is there, next it is gone. It senses danger

through a sense of smell it detects through special sensors, as well as movement through vibrations. It's camouflage help it to vanish without a trace. Perhaps it is these characteristics Jesus had in mind, this awareness of danger, speed of response, acute sensitivity, and discretion, when describing the serpent as wise. Certainly, these characteristics are very useful indeed to the sheep who are to be harmless as doves, rather than the characteristic of being deceitful.

By way of illustration Jesus said to his flock Luke 21:15: *For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.* Paul advised 1 Corinthians 14:20 *Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.* Similarly Ephesians 5:15-17 *See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.*

To the end that as Paul describes in: Philippians 2:15: *That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world;*

Brother Terry