Palm Sunday Year C 2022

I don’t normally preach a sermon on Palm Sunday – after all, having read the passion, what more can one say? But, pre-reading Luke’s account a thought came to me – a thought about ‘trial’. ‘Trial’ – hard work, difficult endeavour, examination by testing – yes, the Passion would have been all of those things to Jesus – but how about ‘trial’ as the examination by a court to determine guilt or innocence – ‘trial’ as a judicial process?

In Luke’s narrative there are four trials of this type. Jesus is the accused in two of them; the first before the Jewish authorities, where the accusers are both judge and jury and the outcome is inevitable. The second is before Pilate where Jesus is found to be innocent, although in neither trial does he enter a plea, instead he refuses to acknowledge the validity of the court.

Then comes the third trial, that of Pilate – not a formal trial of course. He’s in charge, so no-one can challenge his decision – but he is challenged by a hostile crowd egged on by the religious authorities. ‘Crucify him, crucify him’. And we find Pilate guilty; guilty of condemning an innocent man to death for the sake of expediency. He doesn’t want a riot in Jerusalem – a report of which might get to the ears of the emperor. He wants to contain this local Jewish squabble – better that one man die – even if he is innocent. Pilate is certainly guilty – guilty of being a murderous coward. He washes his hands and walks away from his guilt – just as we do when we walk away from confronting something which needs to be confronted – for fear of upsetting people, fear of criticism, for fear of loss of reputation, for fear of, well, fear of fear. We pursue our own agendas for the sake of expediency.

And then there is the fourth trial – perhaps the one we never really think about - the trial of Peter. The judges in this trial are the servant girl and the onlookers in the courtyard. ‘This man also was with him’. To this accusation peter replies ‘Woman, I do not know him’. As the words come out of his mouth Peter knows them to be a lie, and yet they are also the truth. For the best part of three years Peter has been with Jesus. At Caesarea Philippi Peter has declared Jesus to be the Messiah, but then immediately tries to turn Jesus from the path he must take – ‘Get behind me, Satan’. Jesus knows Peter will fail him, so he is tried and found guilty of failure and betrayal. And yet, at that last supper together, Jesus has told Peter ‘when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers’. Guilty – and forgiven.

‘I do not know him’. Could we admit to that? Of course, we know about him, but do we know him? Can we say with St Paul ‘I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection’. (Phil 3.10)

In the courtyard, before the judgement of those gathered there, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. In order to save his life he loses it – until Jesus revives him with the triple instruction about feeding the flock. Guilty, guilty, guilty; loved, loved, loved; and commissioned!

The only person innocent in all these trials is Jesus. He has done nothing wrong. This story lays bare our human condition. We resist the love, grace and mercy of God. We silence honest voices. We listen to false voices. We condemn innocent people when it suits us. We turn our backs on the needy because ‘we can’t do everything’ so choose to do nothing.

‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’.

Surely that should be ‘Father, forgive us for we do not know what we are doing’, although sometimes we know exactly what we are doing and do it anyway.

Guilty as charged – guilty, loved, forgiven and commissioned.

Don’t forget the commission.