

**SERMON – 14/2/21**  
**'Trial by a Friend'**

Mark 14:66-72

Then Peter said, “I swear that I am telling the truth! May God punish me if I am not! I do not know the man you are talking about!” (Mark 14:72)

It is 2021 and the world is in turmoil. Questions are being asked about many aspects of life that once were taken for granted and the future of all kinds of things is up in the air – the expectation that people will go out to work, the presumption that shopping will be done in the High Streets and retail parks of our towns and cities, the assumption that, when Covid restrictions are eased and then finally lifted, we will necessarily take up our way of life as we left it last March. Everything is under scrutiny, everything is up for discussion.

It is 2021 and churches are closed. And yet church services have never been more accessible. Last weekend when I was off, although I did not leave the parish, I was able to attend our own service without anyone knowing I was there, and also take in the service from Orwell & Portmoak as well as dropping in on churches where I have worshipped in the past – in the Borders, at university, and overseas. At least twice in the past week alone the church office here has had contact from people a long way from Kinross who are regularly attending our services. As with so much in our time, the future for Kinross Parish Church is going to be different than the past has been. Everything is under scrutiny, everything is up for discussion.

One of the great opportunities of these tumultuous times is that the claims of Christ are being scrutinised by those who might never have found their way into a church building let alone attended an act of worship where the Gospel was being preached. Today, however, Jesus is on trial, and any one of us may be called upon as a witness not in the secure environment of our church building, because few of us are currently able to enter these hallowed courts at the moment, but virtually anywhere and by virtually anyone who may ask us the reason for the hope that we have in Christ.

Wind back the clock nearly 2000 years. Jerusalem is in turmoil – the great feast of Passover is in full swing against a backdrop of political unrest and

popular expectancy. It is the culmination of Christ's earthly ministry and the stakes could not be higher. The religious authorities are determined to arrest Jesus and put Him to death; the political authorities of the Roman occupation are looking for a quiet life and will do anything to quell the simmering public unease; Jesus' followers – not only His twelve disciples but also those who over the previous three years have marvelled at His teaching and His miracles – are filled with hope and expectation that something extraordinary is about to happen, although they are completely deaf to what the Lord Himself has been saying about the inevitability of His arrest and execution.

During these Sundays of Lent we are reading the account of Jesus on trial. Last Sunday Kathy invited us to consider two sides of the question, “What have I done to deserve this?” Jesus was on trial before the Jewish Council: what had He done to deserve the trumped up charges and the false witnesses and the condemnation of the court? And what have you and I done to deserve the grace that we have been shown by our loving and holy God?

This morning I would like to shine a light on the story that Stephanie read for us earlier, a powerful story, a story familiar to most of us, the story of what one of Jesus' closest followers contributed to the trial of Jesus, the story of how Peter, who had so spectacularly declared Jesus to be the Messiah and who had promised to follow Him and never disown Him, just hours later denied that he even knew Him, not once, not twice but three times in succession. As he was speaking, we're told, the cock crowed, just as the Lord had foretold, and in his account Luke tells us that Jesus, still on trial before the Sanhedrin, turned and looked straight at Peter out in the courtyard, who broke down and cried. I venture to suggest that this denial by one of His closest friends brought greater hurt to Jesus than any of the falsehoods the authorities could throw at Him in court and deeper wounds even than the soldiers inflicted on Him on the way to the Cross. Peter too was on trial and he was found wanting.

Have you ever been let down by a friend? Or, on the other hand, have you ever dropped someone else in it to try and save your own skin? Jesus is on trial here but actually so is Peter, and so are you and I. And I think that as we take a closer look at this well-known story there are some important lessons for us all to learn not only about the trial that Jesus suffered for our

sake but about how we may find ourselves unexpectedly challenged, even (and perhaps especially) by our friends, and about how we may stand firm as witnesses for Christ when the pressure is on us.

Don't let's forget that when Jesus was arrested, all the disciples left Him and ran away. Peter alone followed to the courtyard of the High Priest's house where an illegal night-time meeting of the Sanhedrin had been called. We are given three little cameo descriptions of what is going on outside as Jesus is being tried by the Council indoors.

A servant girl comes past Peter as he skulks in the shadows and all she says is 'You too were with Jesus of Nazareth.' Unlike the evidence that was being led inside, this much was true. But Peter denied it and stammered that he didn't understand what she was talking about. What if Peter had admitted to the servant girl at the door that he *had* been with Jesus? It would have been perfectly natural for him to have been there to see what was going to happen to his friend. Who knows, the servant girl might well have been satisfied with his answer and gone on doing her job with no further comment. Even if she had reported the presence of one of Jesus' disciples, the kangaroo court inside the house was having enough trouble finding *any* charges that would stick to Jesus – the last thing they would have wanted to bother about was a Galilean fisherman who, if anything, could have testified in Jesus' defence. Peter slips into a passageway, the cock crows although he doesn't appear at that point to remember what Jesus had predicted earlier in the evening.

The servant girl's suspicions are further aroused by Peter's protestations and she shares her accusation with those who are standing around – like most of humanity she enjoys passing on a choice morsel of gossip especially if it may cause embarrassment; we call it social media today, but it has the same effect – it takes the accusation away from the one-to-one conversation they had been having, and out of the realm of due process, into the unregulated court of public opinion. The accusation begins to grow arms and legs - “You can't deny that you are one of them, because you too are from Galilee.” That also was true – they could probably tell from his accent – but it's the sort of leap you can make from circumstantial evidence that ends up with someone being falsely accused and found guilty of something they have not done. It's like saying that someone is guilty of

some misdemeanour in Kinross just because they come from Kelty or Cowdenbeath or Lochgelly – and that's never happened, has it?!

Of course Peter recognises the danger he is in and he is quick to deny the charge a second time and for good measure a third time, protesting rather too much for his own good that he is telling the truth, swearing an oath and calling down punishment from God if he is lying: “I do not know the man you are talking about.” Cue cock-crow. He is guilty, on the evidence of his own mouth, and he has upped the stakes by swearing an oath.

We do well to remember that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught: “Let your Yes be Yes and your No be No. Anything beyond this comes from the Evil One.” Just tell the truth, He's saying; tell the whole truth, all of it; and don't add anything that isn't true. It couldn't be simpler, actually, and it would save a huge amount of trouble and heartache if we would all follow that simplest of teachings, whether we are speaking to the police, to a journalist or to our neighbour; whether we are standing in court, on a street corner or on our phone; whether we are giving evidence before a parliamentary committee or writing on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter.

It is 2021 and in these extraordinary times, Jesus is on trial and we are His witnesses, all of us. The opportunity to stand up and speak up for our Friend may come to us in the least expected moment, and like Peter we may find that it is we who are suddenly on trial. Of course we love to say with Peter in the best moments of our faith journey: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Of course when we are called upon to profess our faith in company with our fellow-believers, we proclaim that we will follow Jesus wherever He calls us. But what about when we are warming our hands by the fire in a public place, whether in person or online, perhaps at work or in the company of people who do not share our faith? What about when we are among those who are taking the Lord's name in vain or making light of spiritual values? What about when you are in more hostile company and you are the only committed Christian there.

Jesus is on trial; you and I are on trial. Jesus is our Friend – are we going to speak up for Him, or are we going to deny that we even know Him? One day we will all stand before the Judge of all the earth. There we will have a faithful Friend and Advocate who will speak up for us before the throne of grace. Let that promise inspire our living here and now.