

Jesus on Trial

A popular church poster reads, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" This is certainly a thought-provoking and soul-searching question!

Although Christians are not routinely jailed for practicing their faith, there is increasing scrutiny on the belief system and its perceived "intolerance." As a result, many Christians are fearful of offending others or worry about how they may be perceived if they make a stand about their faith.

Yet Jesus Himself was not afraid to make a stand.

Our gospel reading today shows Jesus made certain people angry and hostile. Yet He always showed love, even toward those who rejected Him.

Jesus was eventually tried, convicted and killed for His teachings and beliefs.

Our passage today is about Jesus being on trial. This was not an official trial, that would come later in the form of Herod, Pilate and the High Priest. But this is a warm up for it. This is the rehearsal.

Throughout his ministry he was constantly on trial, every word, every action, every thought, was carefully being weighed and watched. Chapter 5 of John's gospel is a template of accusation and response, prosecution and defense.

Remember the purpose of John's gospel is summed up in chapter 20 v31, "But this is written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name".

In his gospel, John presents Jesus in many ways, but today we enter the court room, and we are the jury; pull up your chair, for you have to decide if Jesus is who he claims to be.

The Sanhedrin were the religious police both in the villages and in Jerusalem and they were a court that maintained the religious life of Israel dating back to the time of Moses.

The accusation they levelled against Jesus.

1. Why did you heal on the Sabbath?
2. Why do you call God your Father?
3. Why are you making yourself equal with God?

They were so furious that they were ready to kill him. Yes, he was found guilty of all three charges.

So Jesus stands in the dock and he has to defend himself.

He unequivocally claims a special relationship with God. He claims to be working with and for God. He is God's ambassador, God's special agent, and as God's Son, he has the privilege of knowing his Father's will and is acting on behalf of his father.

At the time of Christ, the agent's words were binding on his audience, and the king who sent him, had total trust in him. This is part of Jesus' defence, that he has been sent and works hand in glove with his Father, and so those who honour the Son will honour the Father. "My Father is always at work to this very day, and I too am working...." 5v17

The Father loves the Son, and the Son can only do what the Father is doing.

By talking to God, and calling him, "Abba, Father," Jesus showed an intimacy that had not been conveyed before in approaching God. It revealed a sense of familiarity that had never been used by the ancient Judeans in their religious prayers.

This to the religious authorities was blasphemy.

Jesus claims that God doesn't take a rest on the Sabbath; God's work is continual, and so Jesus has no problem, healing on the Sabbath, because he is the doing the work of God.

His Father is working through him and he goes further and states, "For the Father loves his Son and shows him all he does" v20. This amazing relationship between Jesus and his Father.

Then he brings in other witnesses to testify to this relationship.

He told them that John the Baptist gave testimony; John 5:33-35 – Jesus said that John the Baptist was a bright light amongst them and they chose to enjoy his light and John testified to the truth, which is that Jesus is the Son of God. John said, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world".

He introduces Moses into the trial. Moses gave testimony; John 5:41-47 – For Moses wrote about Jesus and still they refused to believe him.

Then Jesus pointed them to the work and miracles that he is performing – are these not signs of God's kingdom at work? These works testify about me. The very works that I am doing testify that the Father has sent me.

Then he brings in the testimony of the Scriptures. The Scriptures themselves testify to who Jesus was.

So, Jesus presents his defence to those who were persecuting and prosecuting him.

Jesus lays before the religious leaders his reasons for healing on the Sabbath. Willie Barclay writes, “This passage is so important...”

We find that Jesus is laying down, “sure foundations”, for his ministry, and he is making his case directly to them, as he defends himself against them.

So how does this tie in with our Dedication of our Guild today? Well the Guild's motto, is “Whose we are and whom we serve”. A great motto for it is a reminder of what their organisation is based on and built on. Strong foundations. Whose we are? Christ's people. Whom we serve ? - Christ Jesus.

The Guild over the next three years has an overarching theme - Let us build a house.

They are adopting the following themes:

2024 - Sure Foundations

2025 - Living Stones

2026 - Beyond the Walls.

This year, “sure foundations”, we are encouraged to look at our spiritual foundations and check them, and see if they are deep, and if we are building on solid ground and ask the question, whose are and to whom do we serve.

The outgoing convenor of the Guild wrote, “Have you ever looked at a house or an estate being built? It looks very complex, setting the foundations, connecting each house to the grid, sewage system and water supplies etc. while all the time, conforming to planning regulations and environmental laws.

There are similarities as we look at our ‘building’, not a house, but a ‘household of faith’.

This is explained in Ephesians 2: 19-22: "So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together we are His house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Jesus Christ Himself."

Traditionally the cornerstone is the first stone laid for a structure. It is the reference point for all the others. It determines the entire construction, giving stability, so that no matter the variables of weather or sudden events the house will still stand.

We have no better reference point than Jesus, showing us not only how to live but how to maintain connection with God and with each other... Once a house is built it is exciting to take possession, develop a garden, and get to know the neighbours. Let us remain excited and expansive as we broaden our horizons and move into new territory. It was the sport psychologist Denis Waitley who said, "Expect the best, plan for the worst, expect to be surprised!" God is the God of the unexpected and He always surprises. Be prepared - Rae Lind National Convener

Yes, the foundation stone of the building is of paramount importance.

For a few moments let us look to where our foundations should be.

Today, we have witnessed that the first sure foundation, that Jesus builds on, is the Love that Father and Son have, and in that relationship Jesus does his work.

This is the cornerstone of the building, and it's our cornerstone also. For we are also in Christ, we are connected to the Father through Jesus, and so our foundation stone is in the love of God. As the Father loved Jesus, so he loves us, and today friends, that is the building block, this is the foundational principle in which we build our lives as Christians, our spiritual houses and that is in the love of God. Are we trusting in God's love? We can do so through the cross, where Jesus gave his life for the world and for us.

God's Word is another sure foundation. We build our lives on the word of God, our spiritual lives depend upon it, just like Thomas Muir escaped Botany Bay with a compass and Bible, so we carry our compass, the Bible, in our hearts. His word sets us free; his word is a sure foundation.

The Guild's motto is "Whose we are and Whom we serve" – It tells us that they know whose they are and whom they serve and that's what Jesus is laying down for his accusers.

By building on this foundation of God's love shown in Jesus we can certainly say, we know whose we are, whom we serve.

Jesus lays before his prosecutors the fact that they have the Scriptures, they study the Scriptures and yet they don't know God.

It is possible to be religious, to be a church-goer, to turn up on Sundays but yet not know God in our lives. We can know all about God, I'm sure the atheist Richard Dawkins knows all the arguments for the existence of God and so can we, and yet miss the blessing of knowing God. That's exactly what they had done with Jesus. They knew their Scriptures but didn't know the author.

So a second pillar is God's Word, not just to have a head knowledge but a heart knowledge.

But Jesus also stood on the shoulders of giants. He brings into his argument John the Baptist and Moses and informs his accusers that they both testified to Jesus. There are many giants of the Christian faith that we can lean on and we can draw strength from and so be encouraged from.

So, foundations are crucially important and Jesus lays before his opponents the reason why he was doing what he was called to do.

He was building on the foundation of God's love; on Scripture with the testimony of John the Baptist and Moses.

The wise man builds on the rock

Jesus' simple but profound story is all about building on the rock. The rock is Christ, his life, his teachings, his sacrifice.

The story of the wise and foolish builders will be heard often throughout the year in Guild meetings up and down the land.

It asks the question, are we building our faith on the right foundations? Are we building our faith in Christ, on Christ, and are we building his Kingdom here in the church on the right foundations?

Corrie ten Boom, the former prisoner of war, whose post-war books have inspired many once said: "If you look at the world you'll be distressed. If

you look within, you'll be depressed. If you look at God, you'll be at rest". Her faith was secure in Christ. Ours can be too.

So, we have seen that Jesus is on trial. The evidence – well, in my judgement, it proves it beyond reasonable doubt. But having heard Jesus' claim and having seen the evidence – it calls us/you to make a verdict today.

Is Jesus who he claims to be? Is there enough evidence to convict him?

CS Lewis, one of the giants of our faith, came to this conclusion...

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [that is, Christ]: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.... You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

How have we responded to Jesus, the one who was sent by God the Father? If for you, the jury is still out on that question – don't deliberate too long. As Jesus said earlier in our reading:

5:25 'I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.'

And if you're already a believer, and you're called upon to testify, then let us be diligent in having sure foundations for our faith and present the evidence.

Know it well, so you can explain it to others, and share it gently but firmly, giving others the opportunity to make their verdict. Because ultimately, it's not Jesus who's on trial, it's us.

Is there enough evidence to convict you of being a Christian?

Amen.