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Sifted Like Wheat (Luke 22: 66 – 23: 49)

Good Friday

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‘Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat’. These words spoken by Jesus on the night of his betrayal, are unique to Luke’s gospel. And last night, as we heard them in the garden, I suggested they signify Luke’s profound understanding that what’s going on in the events of Easter is not just Jesus’ passion but the passion of the disciples. They’ve been led into a place so hard and frightening that their self-preserving instincts are necessarily provoked – and the undermining, doubting, accusing little voice that’s in all our heads begins to agitate and seduce them, rationalizing their commitments, suggesting escape routes. Overnight, Peter has denied Jesus three times, and the other disciples have simply disappeared from the narrative. They’re in the process of being tried, of discovering just what it might cost to remain true to the life they’ve glimpsed in their teacher. And it’s not just Jesus’ closest disciples either. This is a sifting that reveals a world.

A striking feature of Luke’s narrative is its insistence on Jesus’ innocence. Over and over again, key protagonists recognize the whole thing is a set-up, a sham, unnecessary. ‘I find no basis for an accusation against this man’, says Pilate. ‘I have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod...’. And a third time, ‘I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death. I will therefore have him flogged and then release him’. It should be enough to change the course of events, you’d think. Yet somehow, it isn’t. Even when the truth is there in plain sight, recognized and acknowledged by those with power to act, there’s a profoundly disturbing inertia, a refusal to respond accordingly, as if some malign undertow has caught them up and it’s easier just to go along with it. Not unlike the approvals process for the Adani coal mine.

How does it come to this? The crowd, hitherto defenders and supporters of Jesus, have been whipped to a frenzy by the false accusations peddled by their leaders; King Herod, who'd been looking forward to meeting him, is disappointed by the experience and so joins his enforcers in contemptuous mockery; and in the end Pilate, who knows which side his bread is buttered, gives 'his verdict that the mob's demand should be granted'. It doesn't matter any longer what the truth is – because there's no one willing to stand for it.

Which doesn't stop it from continuing to peep through. One of the criminals crucified with Jesus recognises it; and so does the centurion standing at the foot of the cross – 'Certainly, this man was innocent', he proclaims. And when the frenzy subsides, and their illusory victory won, the crowds recognize it too – they return home, beating their breasts, suddenly shocked at what they've been part of. In human life, it seems, truth can somehow be simultaneously known and then unknown – conveniently suppressed; it can be acknowledged and then completely ignored. We're familiar with the dynamic, the divided consciousness that paralyses action on climate change, refuses to hear of the genocide of indigenous Australians, and pretends that poverty is a lifestyle choice. Here that divided consciousness is laid bare in all its self-serving absurdity.

Yet, as I've already suggested, not everyone is caught to the same extent. In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, there's a totalizing feel to the passion story – everyone is against Jesus, the mockery is relentless, the drive to condemn absolute. But on Luke's account, differentiation is still possible – yes, there's plenty of contempt on offer from the soldiers and religious leaders; but for Luke's Jesus there are also women beating their breasts and wailing for him in the streets, there's the crowd gradually less involved in the scoffing and beginning to repent, the friendly criminal on the neighbouring cross and the women who had followed him from Galilee. Luke seems to be saying that we human beings aren't wholly powerless in the face of dividedness, malignness, rampant populism – it's possible to remain

faithful (more or less) to what you know of the truth, even in testing times. And some do.

So where does all this leave us? In the Christian vision, when Jesus gives himself into the hands of untruth and systemic violence, he reveals that he, that God, will not stop loving us, no matter how much we turn away or seek to secure our being at his expense. ('Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'). In the process, he invites us to become aware how we do turn away – maybe not wholly, like a cynical Pilate or a pitiless priest – but even so, wary of whole-hearted solidarity – strategically distancing ourselves, going quiet, blending in with the crowd.

Some Good Friday services invite participants to contemplate these dynamics and so gaze on the cross of Christ in a self-accusing, guilty kind of way ... 'it is my sin' that nailed him to the tree, my indifference, my instinct for self-preservation. And there's something true in this – in the sense that we're all capable, we all know in ourselves these things. And yet, if we get stuck here, it seems to me we've missed a call to something deeper. It is important, as Luke invites, to recognise our tendencies to withhold, our fear of really giving ourselves to God's promise and call, and the impact of that. But the reason this matters is that the more we can recognise and be healed of what holds us back – and mostly it's to do with our wounds, our fear of vulnerability, our experiences of trust betrayed – the more we *will* be able to give ourselves. And as that happens, we'll realise we're not so much gazing *at* the cross, as (mysteriously) looking from it, in the heart of it. We'll find ourselves increasingly on the *inside* of Christ's love, joined to it – no longer guilty onlookers, but participants in Christ-ic life.

And I wonder if this is what being sifted is really about – it is a testing process, but it's not punitive. Being drawn by Christ's self-giving love to face and be reconciled to the whole of ourselves, is what allows the emergence in and through us of his own love and truth. It's the liberation of our full humanity and solidarity, the kernel of new life – the gift he came, and died, to give.