

MATT 26.14-16: JUDAS WHO BETRAYED HIM

This week I read of how some years ago a pastor and two girls who belonged to his church were sentenced to death by the Chinese communists.

The pastor was promised release if he would shoot the girls. He accepted.

On the day of execution, the girls bowed respectfully before their pastor. Then one of them said: *“Before being shot by you, we wish to thank you for what you have meant to us. You baptized us, you taught us the way of eternal life, you gave us Holy Communion with the same hand in which you now have the gun. You also taught us that Christians are sometimes weak and commit terrible sins, but they can be forgiven again. When you regret what you are about to do to us, do not despair like Judas, but repent like Peter. God bless you, and remember that our last thought was not one of indignation against your failure. Everyone passes through hours of darkness. We die with gratitude”*.

The pastor then shot the girls, Afterwards he was shot by the communists.

Much as one admires the spirit of the two girls, it is essentially a sad story – for it is a story of a minister betraying his calling.

And yet, however inexcusable his behaviour, it was at least understandable – for wrong though he was, he was at least trying to save his skin.

By contrast the betrayal of Judas Iscariot was in a totally different league.

Judas’ life was not threatened – and yet he betrayed his friend – and in betraying his friend he then set in motion the inevitable process which was to lead to the death of Jesus, the Son of God.

Judas, what made you do it?

Judas what caused you to commit this terrible act of betrayal?

As we read the Gospels there is always a note of horror associated with the name of Judas. For almost every time Judas Iscariot is mentioned he is described as Judas **“one of the 12 disciples”** (26.14).

Judas belonged to that inner circle of the 12 who for three years lived with Jesus – who for three years had seen Jesus at work, teaching and healing – it was one of Jesus closest and most trusted of friends who betrayed him. ***It was a shocking deed.***

It was too an unexpected deed.

For although in Matthew’s account of the calling of the twelve, Judas is described as the one **“who betrayed Jesus”** (10.4), at the time there was no hint of the betrayal that was to come. Nor was there any hint over the next three years.

So when during the Passover meal Jesus said to his disciples, **“I tell you, one of you will betray me”** (26.21), they didn’t all turn round and knowingly point at Judas, rather we read: **“The disciples were very upset and began to ask him, one after the other, ‘Surely, Lord, you don’t mean me’”** (26.22).

As far as they were concerned Judas was still very much one with them.

They must have found the betrayal of Jesus as difficult to understand as we do.

What was it that caused Judas to betray the Lord Jesus?

Various reasons have been advanced

1) *Greed*

The most common motive assigned to Judas is greed. Judas saw an opportunity to cash in on Jesus.

So Matthew tells us that Judas when he went to the chief priests asked: “**What will you give me if I betray him to you?**” Matthew goes on to say that Judas was paid “**thirty pieces of silver**” for his services (Matt 26.15). Here the impression is given that money is a motive.

However, if money was the motive, then one has to admit that *the reward was dreadfully out of proportion to the deed.*

For the 30 silver pieces that Judas was offered was not exactly a king’s ransom. Those 30 silver pieces were worth only 120 denarii. Now one denarius was the average daily wage of a working man: i.e. 30 pieces of silver was worth *four month’s salary*. OK not exactly nothing – but would one betray a friend just for that? Might we not have expected Judas to have driven a better bargain with the priests, if money was the object?

2) *Disillusionment*

Greed, however, is not the only possible motive. It may well be that disillusionment may have laid at the root of his betrayal.

In this respect I find *the timing of Judas’ decision* to betray Jesus significant. Judas didn’t decided to betray Jesus before they came to Jerusalem. Rather, it happened on the last Wednesday of Jesus’ life. At that stage Judas had witnessed the so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but no doubt to his intense disappointment Jesus hadn’t followed it up. Instead of using his popular support to storm the Roman HQ, Jesus simply turned round, left the city, and went to spend the night with his friends in Bethany (21.17). For Judas, that could well have been a terrible let-down.

I think it is very probable that *Judas believed Jesus was the Messiah - but he did not perceive him to be a suffering Messiah* who would end up on a Cross. Judas probably shared the popular Jewish conception of the Messiah: viz. one who would come from God to liberate God’s land from the Roman forces of occupation. All the time he had been following Jesus, he had been waiting for the moment when Jesus would put himself at the head of a bunch of Zealots and sweep the Romans from the land. When Jesus did not, then Judas became a disillusioned man. Indeed, from being a disillusioned man Judas may well have become a bitter man. From loving Jesus, Judas came to hate Jesus. *Judas may well have betrayed Jesus, because Jesus had seemed to betray him and the cause for which he stood.*

This theory is not so speculative as it may sound. It is given some credence by Judas' second name. Judas **Iscariot**.

- Traditionally Iscariot has been understood to mean "a man of Kerioth", Kerioth being a village in the extreme south of Judea.
- However, there is another possible derivation of the name. The suggestion has been made that the name Iscariot is connected with the Latin word 'sicarius'. Now the 'sicarii' were literally 'the dagger bearers'. They were fanatical Jewish nationalists - the equivalent of today's Real IRA. But instead of carrying bombs they carried daggers with which they were prepared to murder any Roman who gave them an opportunity to do so. Indeed, not just any Roman - any Jew who could be suspected of the least collaboration with Rome.

Judas Iscariot, Judas the dagger-bearer, was by background a Jewish nationalist.

He had understood Jesus to be one too. But when Judas began to see that Jesus refused to take the way of violence, but rather took the way of suffering, then he became disillusioned, then he betrayed Jesus into the hands of his enemies.

Yes, betraying Jesus is the very kind of thing that a disappointed dagger-bearer would have done.

On the other hand, appealing as this theory is, none of the Gospel writers allude to this at all. Instead, the Gospel writers suggest two other possibilities.

3) *Satan*

Lk introduces the scene in which Judas goes to the authorities by reporting: "**Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot**" (22.3)

Similarly John, before the Last Supper John informs the reader: "**The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him**" (13.2)

A little later, after Jesus had dipped the piece of bread and given it to Judas, John writes: "**After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him**" (13.27)

I.e. for Lk and John, Judas was simply the instrument of Satan - in a sense Satan was the main agent in giving Jesus over!

BUT: to what extent can we put all the blame on the Evil One?

The fact is that *we human beings also have a share of responsibility*.

Nobody can be used without their consent. The glory - and the tragedy - of humankind is that we have been given a free will: it is for us to choose to be used by God or to be used by Satan.

Judas is the man who consented to be used by Satan.

Satan may have entered into Judas, but Judas had to let him in!

4) *The Scriptures*

Matthew never mentions Satan. Instead, he - as indeed the other Gospel writers - attributes, in part at least, the betrayal of Judas to the fulfilment of Scripture.

Thus in Matt 26.24 Jesus says to his disciples as they are eating together the Passover meal: "**The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom**

the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born” (14.21).

Similarly at the moment of betrayal Jesus says to those who came to arrest him: **“Did You have to come with swords & clubs to capture me, as though I were an outlaw? Every day I sat down in the Temple, and you did not arrest me. But all this has happened in order to make what the prophets wrote in the Scriptures come true” (26.55,56).**

Precisely what Scriptures are in mind is uncertain

- According to John 13.18 Jesus specifically referred to *Ps 41.9* where the righteous sufferer declares: **“Even my best friend, the one I trusted most, the one who shared my food, has turned against me” (GNB)**
- Another Scripture which may be in mind is *Zech 11.12*, where there is a reference to the payment of **“30 pieces of silver”**

On the other hand, there may be no particular Scripture in mind. It may be a way of stating that everything that takes place is according to God’s plan.

In the plan of God even the treachery of Judas has a positive role to play.

For his evil act was ultimately a means of good. For today we are able to call ‘Good Friday’ what at the time seemed to be the darkest of days.

My mind goes to the words of Joseph to his brothers found in Gen 50.20: **“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good”**

Yes, in all things God is able to work for good!

But if God was at work in the betrayal, where does this leave Judas?

Does this mean that Judas was not a free man - that his actions were pre-determined - that he was predestined to betray Jesus?

I find this difficult to believe.

True, the Gospels show that ***Jesus knew that Judas would betray him.***

But I find it difficult to believe that Jesus picked Judas to be one of the 12 in order that Judas might betray him. This would have been entirely out of keeping with the character of Jesus. If we believe that our Lord’s incarnation involved some lack of knowledge (& there were things that Jesus confessed he did not know) then it is not difficult to believe that he chose Judas with the same affection as he chose the others. But gradually Jesus came to realise that far from following him Judas would ultimately betray him. But ***this foreknowledge did not involve predestination.***

Just as we know that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, but our knowing it doesn’t make it rise, so Jesus knew that Judas would betray him, without the knowledge compelling Judas to act as he did.

Indeed, even when Jesus did realise what Judas was up to, he did not give up.

For ***even at the Last Supper Jesus appealed to him to change his mind.***

This surely was what caused Jesus to say: **“I tell you, one of you will betray me” (26.21).** Jesus sought to confront him with his own sin. *‘Look at what you’re contemplating doing - can you really do a thing like that?’* Foreknowledge is not predestination.

Judas was a free man - both as far as God and Satan are concerned.

He had freedom of choice to go God’s way or to reject his way.

Indeed, we are all free actors in the drama of salvation and damnation - no part is scripted - it is up to us whether we go God’s way or not

So then you can take your choice when it comes to the betrayal of Jesus – maybe Judas was motivated by greed or perhaps by disillusionment, or maybe Judas was being used by Satan. One thing for certain: God was there too, working out his purposes of salvation.

As we cannot leave this morning's sermon simply speculating on the reasons for Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Three more things need to be said:

i) It was because of us that Jesus died

However base were Judas' motives, Judas was not the real villain of the Passion story. For never forget: ultimately Jesus did not die because of Judas – he died because of people like you and me. It was not so much the betrayal of Judas which caused Jesus to go the way of the Cross, but your sin and mine which caused him to suffer and to die.

Don't let's put all the blame on Judas, nor indeed on Pilate, Caiaphas or the crowd. We too share in that blame. We stand in need of forgiveness as much as they did. For all of us have sinned and in so doing have fallen short of God's glory. Yes, it was not just the headline-catching red-blooded sins of the Judases of this world which took Jesus to the Cross, it was also the greyer but no less serious sins of you & me which caused Jesus to hang and suffer. It was because of you and me that Jesus died.

ii) We must never take our salvation for-granted

Let's never forget that Judas was one of the 12. For three years Judas was a disciple of Jesus, and yet at the end he turned his back upon Jesus and betrayed him. The fact is that it is possible to be a disciple of Jesus – it is possible to be baptized member of this church – and yet at the end to turn our back upon Jesus. The sobering words of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* come to mind: "*I saw that there was a way to Hell even from the gates of Heaven as well as from the city of Destruction*". We can never afford to take our salvation for granted. Jesus calls us to keep going until the end.

One of the sadnesses for any minister at an anniversary time is to look back through the records and see the names of people they have baptised, but who are no longer around – its not just that they have gone to another church, but rather they have given up – they have given up on the faith. The fact is that none of us can afford to be complacent – none of us can take our salvation for-granted. Let's never forget that when Jesus calls us, he calls us to a life-time of following.

iii) Failure need never have the last word

The final tragedy of Judas was not that he betrayed Jesus, but that ***he saw betrayal as***

unforgivable.

It is here that we may make a comparison with ***Peter***. For Peter denied his Lord. True, Jesus was in the hands of his enemies at that time, but nonetheless Peter denied Jesus three times. Was Peter's denial any worse than Judas' betrayal?

The real difference between the two is that ***Peter knew there was a way back.***

Judas was not lost because he betrayed Christ, but because he never asked to be forgiven.

There is no such thing as an unpardonable sin - the only unpardonable sin is the refusing the pardon that avails for us all. The good news of the Gospel is: "**The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin**"

Sadly, Judas was blind to the possibility of beginning again.

Let me remind you of the story with which we began. The Chinese girl said to her pastor: "*You taught us that Christians are sometimes weak and commit terrible sins, but they can be forgiven again. When you regret what you are about to do to us, do not despair like Judas, but repent like Peter*".

For all I know there is someone here this morning who feels they have let God down well and truly – indeed, maybe you have. But don't despair like Judas. Rather like Peter, turn to Jesus and open up your life again to him – ***let Jesus, and not your sin, have the last word.***