

Judas – Another Story

Epistle: Acts 1:15-17; 21-26

Gospel: John 17:6-19

Easter 7

I recently came across a story about a Sunday school class in which the question arose, “What was Jesus doing when he descended into hell after his death”? To which one child answered, “He was looking for his friend Judas”.

Poor Judas. Over the centuries, he has been the subject of almost universal condemnation. Throughout the world, the very name Judas has become synonymous with an act of treachery. It’s certainly not a name one wants to carry around. The priest and writer John Killinger tells of a time when he and his wife saw the musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. During the intermission the cast came down and talked to the audience. They met the actor who played Jesus and the one who played Judas. The actors told them that every few nights they switched parts so that the other members of the cast didn’t end up hating them. “Before we did this”, they said, “everyone ostracised the one playing Judas”.

Scripture does not treat Judas well. He was chosen as one of the twelve, but before the ink was dry on the page, all four gospel writers had branded him a traitor (Matt. 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16; John 6:70). He was the keeper of the common purse but according to John “a thief” (12:6). By the time Jesus had gathered his friends for their final meal, Judas is said to have been moved by the devil to betray him (John 13:2).

During the meal, Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, including those of Judas. He then distinguishes between those who will live and serve one another and the one who will betray him. Asked to identify the traitor, Jesus gives Judas a piece of bread, telling him to do quickly what he is going to do. Finally, as he prays for his chosen followers, he also mentions “the one destined to be lost”, but makes no further reference to Judas.

All this seems very hard when viewed alongside the image of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. As the good shepherd, Jesus asserts his determination to seek out the lost. As the narrator of parables he teaches that no human life is beyond God’s love and mercy.

So let’s consider the person of Judas. As a young man, he was defined by his strong, you could say fervent faith, and was looking for a way to make a difference in the world. So when he encounters Jesus and hears his preaching on the coming kingdom, he joins the cause. As a revolutionary, Judas is convinced that he is joining a revolution that will change the world forever.

But the revolution doesn't turn out to be the one he was expecting, and as time goes on the man he has signed up to follow seems to be changing the rules, announcing that it's not going to be a revolution after all. It's going to be a martyrdom – and not a glorious one.

Deeply disappointed, Judas wonders if he can do something about this. Perhaps he can give Jesus a little motivating push, and remind him why they all joined up with him in the first place. Perhaps if the man is brought face to face with the enemy he will remember the original cause and start to really fight. Surely he won't allow the oppressors to win.

So Judas makes a deal with the chief priests who pay him to lead a group of soldiers to the garden where Jesus is. Judas greets him with a kiss, then stands back and waits for the expected firestorm. But Jesus doesn't fight. He just looks at Judas and says, "is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man" (Luke 22:48)? and allows the soldiers take him away.

That is when Judas realises that he has been wrong from the beginning. A glorious revolution was never the plan. He tries to return the money he has been paid but the chief priests aren't interested. He has already served his purpose – which makes him not only a traitor, but also a pawn.

So he goes out into a field and kills himself.

What happens after that is not clear. Jesus has referred to Judas as "the one destined to be lost", and later Peter, wishing to fill his place with another apostle, calls him the one who "turned aside to go to his own place". Judas is not mentioned again in scripture. But his name has become history and history is written by the winners. Judas was a loser, so the usual theory is that he was forever damned. Dante's *Inferno* places him deep in the ninth circle of Hell.

If you believe in God's justice, it may be reasonable to subscribe to that view. But if you believe in God's grace in the face of human failure, there may be another view. It's worth remembering that when Judas realised that Jesus was condemned, he threw his payment at the feet of the chief priests crying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Matt. 27:4). Did that repentance mean nothing?

The truth is, we will never know the truth. But there was a tradition in the early church that Judas' suicide may have been based not simply on despair, but also on hope. As he tied a rope around his neck and kicked away the stool, Judas knew that if God was just, there was no doubt about where he was going. But in the back of his mind was also the hope that if God was merciful, it might well be that in a divine effort to save the souls of the damned, His Son, Jesus Christ would

also be there.

At any rate, it's a scene I'd love to imagine. Two friends who, for three long years had walked, talked, laughed and wept together, teacher and pupil, master and questioner, meeting together in the dark shadows of Hell – both of them a bit worse for wear, one with a deep red mark on his neck, the other with wounds in his hands and feet. Betrayer and Saviour - but this time it is Jesus who gives the kiss, and this time it is not the kiss of death, but of life.

Amen

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16th May, 2021