

**Sermon**

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2010

Lessons                      Isaiah 43: 16 - 21      Philippians 3: 4b - 14      St John 12: 1 – 8

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, who by Your merciful Providence has given us this Holy Book; grant us faith to receive it as the most valuable thing which this world affords. Here is wisdom: here are the lively oracles of God. Blessed is the one who reads, and hears the words of this Book: for these are the words of eternal life, able to make us wise and happy in this world – wise even to salvation, and so happy for evermore; through faith in Christ. Amen.

**Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, 'Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?'**

*St John 12: 3 – 5*

Judas Iscariot, Simon's son: what do we know about Judas? We know, perhaps, that Judas was the man, the disciple, who betrayed Jesus. It was Judas who, at the behest of the chief priests, scribes and elders, brought the 'multitude with swords and clubs' to the Garden of Gethsemane. It was Judas who identified Jesus to the mob with a kiss. For his betrayal, Judas received 'thirty pieces of silver.' The chief priests counted out the money and according to the Gospel of St Matthew, 'From that time he sought opportunity to betray Him.' Once Jesus was in the hands of the Roman authorities and condemned to death, Judas tried to return the money, throwing it down in the temple. St Matthew records, 'He threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and

went and hanged himself.’ Albert Camus said, ‘There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.’ G K Chesterton agreed:

Not only is suicide a sin; it is *the* sin. It is the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take an interest in existence; the refusal to take the oath of loyalty to life. The man who kills himself a man kills a man. The man who kills himself, kills all men; as far as he is concerned he wipes out the world.

Judas betrayed the Prince of Life, took money for doing so and, as his final act, killed himself. In the fourth century, St Augustine said that suicide was an ‘unrepentable’ sin. He said that at no point does the Bible make it lawful to take one’s life. In the thirteenth century, Aquinas reasoned: ‘To bring death upon oneself in order to escape the other afflictions of this life is to adopt a greater evil in order to avoid a lesser. . . . Suicide is the most fatal of sins because it cannot be repented of.’ Judas betrayed Jesus, took money for doing so, and committed suicide.....or did he?

This morning I want us to explore the biblical material, the verses of Scripture, which record for us the story of the most hated and damned of disciples, Judas, the son of Simon. Let me begin with our Scripture reading this morning: the anointing of Jesus at Bethany. In the Gospel of John, the anointing is done by Mary and takes place in Bethany six days before the Passover. Lazarus sits at the table with Jesus and the disciples are present. *One of them*, Judas, complains about the apparent waste of the expensive perfume: the perfume

could have been sold and the money given to the poor. By contrast, in the Gospel of Matthew, the anointing of Jesus takes place in Bethany six days before the Passover but in the home of Simon the leper. In St Matthew's account, Jesus is anointed by a woman, whose name is not recorded and it is not one but all of the disciples who were indignant and protested about the waste of the perfume: 'Why this waste?' they ask. 'For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor?' It is in the Gospel of St John that the complaint of waste comes from the lips of Judas alone and it is in that Gospel only that Judas is described as a thief: 'He was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it.' Matthew's Gospel was written much earlier than that of John. One commentator has said:

John had his failings....He was anything but the delicate, affectionate disciple of love....That he so often spoke of charity and understood it so deeply is possibly due to the fact that he did not possess it – at least not the charity of kindness....Humanly speaking he must have loathed Judas like poison.

The Gospel of St John is the least historical of all the Gospels and that is nowhere more true than in the representation given of Judas. It is surely not possible that Jesus and the disciples would have tolerated Judas as a thief: did they have so much money that they could afford to lose it? And how is it, if he was a thief, that none of the other New Testament writers tell us that? And why is it, in the Book of Acts, when speaking of Judas, Peter makes no mention of Judas as a thief? One scholar has pointedly said, 'It is...possible that John

(the final editor? the community of the Fourth Gospel?) is guilty of slandering and vilifying a fellow disciple.’ We need to read the Bible with the greatest of care.

Judas committed suicide; he hanged himself....or did he? In the Gospel of Matthew, having seen Jesus condemned and then having thrown the pieces of silver into the Temple, he departed, and went and hanged himself. The earliest Gospel, St Mark, makes no mention of Judas’ death. One of the Twelve, the one who betrayed Jesus commits suicide and the earliest Gospel makes no mention of it. Writing decades earlier than the writers of the Four Gospels, St Paul makes no mention of Judas, his betrayal or his suicide. In the Book of Acts, penned by the same author as that of the Gospel of St Luke, Peter tells a crowd of fellow Christians about Judas. Of Judas’ death, said Peter, he ‘fell forward, his middle burst open, and his entrails spilled out.’ No hanging! There are two explicit accounts of the death of Judas in the Bible and they cannot be reconciled.

We are doubtful that he was a thief and we are not sure how he died. What of the thirty pieces of silver? The fourth century theologian and one of the most distinguished early Church Fathers employed his considerable oratorical powers making the sin of greed the motive for Judas’ despicable act of betrayal. The problem with the thirty pieces of silver is that the type of coin referred to had

been out of circulation for nearly three hundred years. Always with the Bible we have to read it with care and so often we are dealing directly with faith narrative, not straight history. Faith narrative carefully weaves together nuggets of historical incidents with theology and liturgy, in prose and in poetry.

You may recall that the Gospel writers often take Old Testament stories and themes and re-work them into the life of Jesus in order to explain their understanding of who Jesus is and His significance for the early Church. The writer of the first Gospel, for example, through the birth narrative, portrays Jesus as the new Moses: there is the flight to Egypt, the slaughter of the innocents and the return from Egypt. Moses, the saviour of God's people, leads them to the Promised Land: Jesus is the new saviour who will lead God's people out of the bondage of Rome. In the Gospel of Luke, Joseph, the betrothed husband of Mary, has dreams and it is through his dreams that God's purposes come to fruition, as it was for Joseph in the Old Testament. But is there a story in the Old Testament or other Jewish writing which tells of betrayal and thirty pieces of silver? Yes, there is. Joseph brings to his father a bad report of his brothers. Enraged with anger and hatred, the brothers sell him to a passing caravan going to Egypt. The original idea was to kill him but Judah persuaded the brothers to sell him. The decision to betray Joseph and sell him was taken during a meal. In rabbinical literature, two of the brothers,

Simon and Gad, negotiated thirty pieces of silver from the passing caravan for Joseph.

But most important of all is the general theological theme of the Joseph story. Joseph who was betrayed by his brothers, one of the Twelve, who is as good as dead, is the one who saves his people: it is Joseph who brings Jacob and all the tribes of Israel to Egypt, to food, safety, prosperity and salvation. His brothers did not know that he was alive: he stood before them but they did not recognise him. Joseph said:

I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not...be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life....God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

What in reality was a betrayal becomes, by the love of Joseph, the providence of God's guiding hand in the lives of them all. This brings me to Jesus and to betrayal.

Judas did not betray Jesus. Betrayal is a breach of trust and it implies deceit.

At no point was Jesus unaware of what Judas was doing. In fact, having washed his feet and offered him bread and wine, Jesus says to Judas, 'What you do, do quickly.' In our lesson this morning, at the anointing at Bethany, Jesus explicitly tells those present that the pouring out of the fragrant oil is for his

burial. Jesus knew that death was coming and he invited Judas to play a central part in that drama. At no point was Jesus unaware of what Judas was doing and at no point does the word 'betray' appear in the Gospels. It does in English, but never in the original Greek. Instead of 'betray', we have *hand over*. Many scholars say that "it is time for the words 'betray' and 'traitor' to vanish from the translations of the New Testament in connection with Judas's deed." The twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth, spoke of Judas' 'vile betrayal'. That betrayal is simply not there.

What is Judas up to and, if he commits suicide, why does he do it? At the Last Supper, Jesus dips a piece of bread and hands it to Judas. He is the one who will *hand over* Jesus to the Jewish authorities. In some medieval pictures, Satan is a tiny demon entering the mouth of Judas as Christ gives him a morsel to eat. Deliberately or unwittingly, the artists suggest that Christ feeds Judas his destiny. In the Bible, Satan is seldom, if at all, evil but rather the agent of God. At God's command, it is Satan who tempts Job and, in the life of Jesus, it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus into the desert to be tempted by Satan. What is Judas up to? Could it be that he was arranging a meeting between Jesus and the High Priest? Could it be that Judas was given assurances about Jesus' safety? Could it be that Judas was Jesus' most trusted and able disciple and that is why he is given the task of dealing directly with the High Priest and why the other disciples do not really know what is going on? Or could it be that we

are simply not able to reach far enough back to the historical truth and that what we have to wrestle with is the theological message which the first century writers wanted to convey? Perhaps what the writers want to tell us is that, with hindsight, in the handing over of Jesus, in his condemnation and death, God brought new possibility, salvation and eternal life.

In the Passion narratives, Jesus seldom speaks; he is tortured, pushed around, stripped and crucified and yet it is those around Him who are judged. ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’ As the Crucified One, He is able to extend the love, compassion and forgiveness of God to all, to every last one. Like Joseph, in death and defeat, God in Jesus brings new life to His people. In the Book of Acts, Peter spoke of Judas’ action as the fulfilment of Scripture. I would be cautious about claiming that God predestined the life of Joseph, Jesus or Judas but out of the very human set of circumstances God brought possibility.

And, finally, the suicide and why he did it. The nineteenth century Congregational preacher, Joseph Parker, said that it is important to note that Judas Iscariot uttered ‘the most effective and precious eulogium ever pronounced upon the character of Jesus Christ. How brief, how simple, how complete – ‘innocent blood.’” If he committed suicide, Judas did so because he had been double-crossed by the High Priest. He had been given assurances

about the safety of Jesus and, without a thought, the High Priest, a Jew, had handed over Jesus to the Roman authorities, to Gentiles. It was a sin to hand over a Jew into the hands of a Gentile authority. Judas did not betray Jesus; he was sent by Jesus. Judas did not doubt his Master; he knew Jesus was innocent of the charges. If there was a sin, it was that he felt he had catastrophically failed Jesus: he had assured Jesus of a safe meeting with the High Priest and Jesus ends up in the hands of the Roman Governor. His final words, 'I have sinned.' Do we hear such confessions from any of the other disciples who abandon Jesus, who flee for their lives, who, like Peter, deny Jesus?

Let me close with this story. Vinzenz Ferrer, a Dominican preacher of the fourteenth century, said that Judas, having handed over Jesus and seeing him condemned, was overwhelmed by a genuine and saving sense of remorse. He tried with all his might to draw close to Christ so that he could apologise for what had happened and his part in it. But since Jesus was accompanied by such a large crowd of people on the way to the mount of Calvary, it was impossible for Judas to come to him so he said to himself: since I cannot get to the feet of the Master, I will approach Him in my spirit and humbly ask for forgiveness. He did that and as he took the rope and hanged himself his soul rushed to Christ on Calvary's mount, asked for forgiveness and received it fully from Christ, went up to heaven with him, and so his soul enjoys salvation along

with all elect. 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' If those words are not for Judas, then who are they for?

Amen.