

Maundy Thursday/Good Friday Matthew 27:27-61

Judas - Betrayer or Betrayed

The Christian tradition which would appear to be in some way indebted to Judas for its very existence is awash with images of the man as a demonic messenger, a lover of money, and a traitor to the Son of Man. For some, Judas is not simply an evil individual, seeking the satisfaction of his own insidious desires, but rather the very embodiment of evil on earth, a metaphysical manifestation of all that is opposed to the good, the noble, and the just. Thus the anathema of the Church against him is viewed as entirely justified, he not only betrayed innocent blood but also spilled the very blood of God. Judas did not conspire merely in a murder but in a deicide.

The popular view of Judas, regardless of what transpired from the act in question, is that the infamous betrayal was conceived and carried out by a criminal mind that was prepared to sacrifice the Messiah for a handful of silver coins.

There are several explanations for this betrayal. In Mark, the earliest Gospel, there is no explicit explanation as to why Judas decided to betray Christ. In Matthew, money is the principal reason. The Gospel of Luke, written at around the same time mentions an additional reason, claiming that Satan had entered Judas, encouraging him to commit the act. In John, the latest Gospel, we find that Judas seems primarily inspired by demonic influence.

John's Gospel portrays Jesus as knowing, at a very early stage, what was going to take place. In other words, he knew what would transpire

from the very beginning, long before Judas would have ever conceived of the plan. If this is true, if Jesus did know what Judas was capable of from early on, then the narrative compels us to ask why he called him to be a disciple in the first place.

The ultimate betrayal according to this traditional reading could thus be said to be the one perpetrated by Jesus against Judas, rather than the other way around. The ambiguity of the phrase “the betrayal of Judas” captures the ambiguity in the traditional reading beautifully. In the Gospels do we witness the betrayal of Judas **against** Jesus or the betrayal of Judas **by** Jesus?

While there is a certain ambiguity within the traditional reading of the story regarding who the ultimate betrayer really was, Judas is still viewed as corrupt and evil. In Matthew his moral weakness is manipulated to fulfill a divine purpose. Yet there is another way of reflecting upon the actions of Judas. It is very possible for Judas to have had less insidious motives for handing over his teacher, motives that were not so selfish after all.

It's possible that Judas was attempting to force a confrontation between Jesus and the chief priests, a confrontation that would display the unjust power and authority of the latter. Many, including the disciples, expected Jesus to directly confront the dominant religious and political powers of the day, setting in motion a revolution that would result in the establishment of an earthly Messianic kingdom.

Matthew paints an image of Judas as one who, racked with guilt, gave

the money back to the authorities before hanging himself. We are presented with a broken man who experienced such deep regret for what had transpired that he committed suicide. It is difficult to interpret this as the act of a cold and remorseless killer who had carefully planned the arrest and execution of Jesus. Rather, it seems to be more in line with the act of one who had set in motion a series of events with results that were both unforeseen and undesired.

We have three images of Judas: as a betrayer; as the one betrayed; as misguided. But there is another more shocking possibility; Jesus not only knew Judas would betray him, or that his betrayal was to fulfill a divine plan, but actually commanded Judas to betray him. John's Gospel informs us that at an early stage Jesus knew what Judas was going to do. What if Jesus knew at an early stage precisely because Jesus was planning to ask him to do it?

This scenario paints a small amount of credulity when we note how Jesus commands that a betrayal must take place in order to fulfill the Scriptures; the way in which Jesus said to Judas, just after the infamous kiss, "Friend, do what you came for"; and the fact that Jesus is presented as knowing in advance about the act even asking that Judas perform it quickly.

The one concern in Matthew is the anathema pronounced against Judas when Jesus says, "But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he had not been born." These words are presumed to represent some kind of curse and condemnation. Why would Jesus curse the one who was about to betray him? Did Jesus

himself not teach that one must bless those who seek to harm us?

Such pronouncements of woe in ancient Judaism are generally expressions of love and concern rather than hatred or retribution. Judas himself judged that it would have been better had he never been born, giving weight to the possibility that these words were said with heartfelt pain and foreknowledge rather than in a spirit of desire for revenge.

Is it then possible that Jesus himself not only wanted Judas to betray him but actually demanded it? Is it possible that Jesus possessed the insight that, for his mission to expand and impact the whole world, this betrayal needed to take place?

It is difficult to view this act as a simple and straightforward act of betrayal. The involvement of God, the complicity of Jesus, and the eventual outcome of the act all point to a situation that is far from simple to understand. One begins to understand that a betrayal may be approached as an act of fidelity or looked at in a different light. In order to see this, let us take into consideration a recently discovered fragment of the long lost Gospel of Peter. Peter writes:

“Early one evening, while the other disciples were busy preparing for the upcoming feast of unleavened bread, Judas fell into a deep and troubled sleep. While he lay motionless on the hard ground, he received a terrifying vision.

In this vision, Judas found himself around a table with the other disciples, sharing an intimate Passover meal with Jesus. At this meal,

Jesus spoke solemnly about broken flesh and sacrificial blood while breaking bread and pouring wine. Judas was then transported to the local Jewish temple, where he promised to identify Jesus with a kiss so that the religious authorities could arrest him.

In the blink of an eye, he found himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, embracing Jesus and tenderly kissing him on the cheek. This was followed swiftly by the arrest, trial, torture, and death of his Lord.

Yet the dream did not end there; instead Judas went on to experience his own sorrow and remorse at this act of betrayal and see firsthand his own harrowing suicide. As if this were not enough, he then found himself in a courtroom with disciples through the ages condemning his actions and pouring out insults. In this vision he went on to witness the Resurrection and the Ascension of his Beloved. He saw the spread of Jesus' message across the entire world, its victory over the forces of Rome and the way in which it would transform the lives of countless millions.

When Judas awoke in a cold sweat from this nightmare, he recalled a teaching that had recently been given by Jesus. Only yesterday Jesus had addressed his disciples, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

As Judas reflected again on these words and on the vision he had just experienced, he felt a profound sadness well up within his heart, for he

finally knew why he had been called. He knew what needed to be done. He understood now what his destiny was.

In this story a fictitious scenario is created that casts the betrayal of Judas in an entirely different light. Here we are led to conceive of Judas as one of the most courageous figures in the Bible, as one who betrayed Christ, not because of a love for money or because he had been overpowered by some demonic influence, but rather because he knew what would result from that betrayal. While this is a fictitious narrative, the idea of playing with the story in this way is encouraged by the biblical text itself. The various conflicting references to Judas invite us to imagine and explore different motives for his behaviour.

The various accounts found in the Gospels cause us to ask whether Judas betrayed Jesus (handing him over for money), whether Jesus betrayed Judas (employing him as a disposable pawn in a divine strategy), or whether Judas and Jesus worked together (planning in advance what was to take place).

This latter possibility is suggested most strongly in the Gospel of Mark, when a woman approaches Jesus and pours expensive perfume over his body. When the disciples question the appropriateness of this act, Jesus responds by pointing out that she is doing it to prepare his body for burial. At this moment, Judas leaves the room and meets with the religious authorities.

What we are left wondering is how the woman knew to pour the perfume over his body, why Jesus knew that she was preparing his body for

burial, and why this ritual acted as the sign for Judas to approach the religious authorities. One is left asking whether these three people had met up previously and carefully planned what would take place.

By understanding the complexity of the betrayal, we are led to consider whether certain acts that might appear to be fundamentally against God, could actually be gestures of fidelity to God. “Take this wine and drink of it, for it is my very blood, shed for you.” With these words an ominous shadow seems to descend upon the room — a chilling darkness that makes everyone shudder uneasily. Jesus continues: “As you do this, remember me.”

Most of the gathered disciples begin to slowly eat the bread and drink the wine, lost in their thoughts. You, however, cannot bring yourself to lift your hand at all, for his words have cut into your soul like a knife.

Jesus does not fail to notice your hesitation and approaches, lifting up your head with his hand so that your eyes are level with his. Your eyes meet for only a moment, but before you are able to turn away, you are caught up in a terrifying revelation. At that instant you experience the loneliness, the pain, and sorrow that Jesus is carrying. You see nails being driven through skin and bone; you hear the crowds jeering and the cries of pain as iron cuts against flesh. At that moment you see the sweat that flows from Jesus like blood, and experience the suffocation, madness, and pain that will soon envelop him. More than all of this, however, you feel a trace of the separation he will soon feel in his own being.

In that little room, which occupies no significant space in the universe, you have caught a glimpse of a divine vision that should never have been disclosed. Yet it is indelibly etched into the eyes of Christ for anyone brave enough to look.

You turn to leave — to run from that place. You long for death to wrap around you. But Jesus grips you with his gaze and smiles compassionately. Then he holds you tight in his arms like no one has held you before. He understands that the weight you now carry is so great that it would have been better had you never been born.

After a few moments, he releases his embrace and lifts the wine that sits before you, whispering, “Take this wine, my dear friend, and drink it up, for it is my very blood, and it is shed for you.” All this makes you feel painfully uncomfortable, and so you shift in your chair and fumble in your pocket, all the time distracted by the silver that weighs heavy in your pouch.

We all have a tendency to identify with the favourable characters in the Bible. For instance, when reading about the self-righteous Pharisee and the humble tax collector, we find it all too easy to condemn the first and praise the second without asking whether our own actions are closer to the one we have rejected than the one we praise.

Judas is here a symbol of all our failures, and Christ’s actions demonstrate his unconditional acceptance. Judas helps to remind us of Christ’s message that he came for the sick rather than the healthy, and that he loves us all and accepts us as we are. **Amen!**