

Sermon : Judas' Betrayal

Over the last three Sundays in Lent, David has shared with us thoughts on three individuals whose actions were partly responsible for the death of Jesus on the cross.

First we had Caiaphas, the legalistic high priest, fearful of the loss of his power and influence.

Then we had Herod Antipas, the weak, hedonistic, self-indulgent Jewish ruler anxious to keep in with the Roman overlords.

Next we had Pontius Pilate, a politician who was very much a man torn between what his conscience told him was right and what was expedient in his rule of this remote outpost of the Roman Empire.

It occurs to me that when you put the human characteristics of these three men in one list: legalism, obsessed with power and influence, weakness, self-indulgence, expediency and a weak conscience--I think we have a very illuminating list of potential sins against God which might be seen a part of our own lives at some time or other. And it is in that light, the idea that but for God's grace we might go the way of Judas Iscariot that lies behind all we will think about this morning.

Judas Iscariot at first glance would seem to be the least complex of the characters, for was he not responsible simply for the betrayal of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane for 30 pieces of silver and who subsequently committed suicide? End of story!

A man whose infamy for this simple act caused his name to be entered into the English language as the archetypal betrayer. You Judas!!

But the brevity and severity of society's judgement of his story and its conclusion seems to have troubled people, particularly in the liberal last few years and there seems to have been an attempt to re-examine his role in more sympathetic terms.

For example, there has been a mood to say that if Jesus's death on the cross was part of God's plan and that for him to achieve that, Jesus needed to be betrayed, maybe Judas was an innocent party acting under God's will.

Not least in this month's life and work we have a thoughtful analysis by the Rev James Martin asking the question Judas-"too harshly judged?"

Whilst we can gain some insight by the thoughts of theologians both ancient and modern, I believe that as with all subjects in Scripture, we have to look at the facts laid down, consider their authenticity, and most important consider what God is trying to tell us in the Scripture that we have, rather than the Scripture that we might like to have.

We may study and even speculate, the ultimate authority has to be God through Scripture and he tells us that what he has given us is adequate for our every need.

In that light, I feel I have to say something about the so-called Gospel of Judas if only to dismiss it.

Archaeologists believe was written towards the end of the second century and recently gained public notoriety first in an article in the National Geographic Magazine and then in three novels, one written by no less than Jeffrey Archer.

This gospel is one of many contemporary writings that are out with the Canon of Scripture.

It is one of the Gnostic texts. The Gnostics were a group who denied the fact that Jesus was wholly human as well as wholly God.

They felt that Jesus's life (as they proposed ours also) are purely a struggle for the spirit to escape the spiritual prison that is our human body.

This would mean that Jesus was never a man at all but an imprisoned spirit.

I believe that idea is totally flawed. Can you see why?

Because that would then deny the virgin birth; it would deny the true sacrifice of Calvary and for that reason would deny the saving grace of Jesus to rid us of the burden of our sins.

If Jesus was only a God and not human then there would be no significance at all of his death taking the burden of human sin.

This would be no sacrifice at all, for a spirit does not feel pain, rejection or death.

Jesus and indeed you and me would just be spiritual souls trying to escape into the afterlife, thereby making our time on Earth, our faith and our actions entirely unimportant.

That goes so strongly against what we believe Scripture tells us that I think it is right to reject it completely.

The theme of the Gospel of Judas is an apparent conversation between Judas and Jesus. It is the origin of this idea that Judas was purely an innocent victim of God's will by his betrayal of Jesus.

The rehabilitation of Judas's reputation would then be complete as he made a sacrifice of his life solely for God's will.

I hope by the end of this morning, you will also share with me the rejection of that idea.

What then do we know about Judas? His name comes from the Hebrew word for "God is praised" and is sometimes referred to as the common name Judah. The origin of the word Iscariot is not universally agreed but it is most likely a description of his origin as a man of Kerioth.

Judas is mentioned in all four Gospels and at the beginning of Acts. The gospel narrative is different in some ways.

Mark identifies a motive for the chief priests looking for a "sly" way to arrest Jesus. They were afraid that the people would riot because of his popularity.

Luke's gospel, which is the basis of our thinking today, contains a clear statement that Satan enters Judas' mind.

Whilst Jesus' enemies clearly needed someone to betray him three of the Gospels state that Judas actively approached the chief priests to initiate the betrayal rather than the other way round.

There are also differences in the scriptural description of Judas' death.

Matthew says that after Jesus is arrested by the Roman authorities but before his crucifixion, the guilt ridden Judas returns the bribe to the priests and committed suicide by hanging himself.

The priests, forbidden by Jewish law from returning "blood money" to the Treasury used it to buy the Potters Field in order to have a place to bury strangers. As is so often the case with Matthew, he presents this as a fulfilment of old Testament prophecy.

In the book of the Acts, Judas is said to use the bribe himself to buy the field, but fell down and "burst asunder" in a particularly dramatic way "and all his bowels gushed out."

We should not find these differences in any way a cause of doubt of the truth of the record. Quite the reverse.

The Gospels were written at least 60 years after the events and up to 100 years later. Had the narratives been exactly the same, I think most people would have smelt a rat and suggested collaboration between the gospel writers. Rather they were a combination of the recollections of the four or probably five authors with all the natural variability that we might expect.

If that is the scriptural record of Judas what may we reasonably deduce? As in all good crime stories we need to look for motive, opportunity and means for a crime.

And in this case, we need to look not only at Judas but also those who felt so threatened by Jesus that they sought his destruction amongst the chief priests, scribes and elders of the people. And finally we have an additional character in our crime scene, that of Satan.

It is a surprise to me that in this present age where we only had to open our newspapers to see acts of extreme evil carried out without obvious purpose

that some people have great difficulty in imagining an active force for evil that we call Satan.

However if we return to scriptural fact, we very quickly realise that Jesus himself believed in Satan, taught about Satan, personally met him and resisted his temptation.

And not only that, Jesus is fully aware that people can be under the influence and direction of Satan without knowing it.

Let's consider for a moment the relationship between Satan and Judas.

In chapter 22:3, we learn that that "Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the 12."

Doesn't it seem extraordinary that someone who has sat at the feet of Jesus for three years, listening to his teaching, watching him heal the sick and bringing goodness to all round about him should be able to be taken over by Satan.

The Greek word translated as entered has a deeper meaning than just entering through a door. It means entering an empty space. It is the same word that is used when Jesus cast out the devil to enter the Gadarene swine - they were empty vessels ready to accommodate the evil spirits .

And once Satan had entered the emptiness of his heart, as we read in John 13, *the devil prompted Judas to betray Jesus.*

I think we have a real message for ourselves here.

It is a simple fact is that if our souls are filled with God's goodness there is no room for Satan to enter in and prompt us to do wrong. Simple isn't it!

And as we look at Judas's motive for the betrayal, we can see those things which perhaps have emptied his soul and made ready a place for Satan to dwell.

So what do we think his motives might be?

His first motive might have been the money itself. In human terms, it seems extraordinary that for a relatively small sum, enough to purchase a small field, Judas would betray his master.

According to John's Gospel, Judas had the responsibility as "accountant" for the disciples, carrying the money bag presumably to fund the day-to-day costs of their itinerant lifestyle.

Of course there is nothing wrong in being an honest accountant!

But Satan entered a man who was already contaminated by the love of money. John's Gospel chapter 12 tells us that he was dishonest and greedy.

When the woman washed Jesus's feet with the expensive perfume, Judas said "why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it).

So the taking of the bribe might just be related to simple greed.

But as an alternative, perhaps Judas was now afraid that his embezzlement of the disciples funds was to become obvious and that the 30 pieces of silver could be replaced in the public purse and his crime would be undetected.

The love of money is so pernicious.

Doesn't it sometimes seem quite extraordinary when we read of business scandals where first small amounts of money are stolen and then larger and larger amounts, despite the fact that eventually there must be no doubt that the people responsible would be found out.

This acceleration of greed in the face of almost certain discovery tells us how dangerous the love of money is for itself.

Such a love is a very pertinent example of something that can dislodge God from our souls.

I think the second possible motive for Judas was a loss of belief in what Jesus's ministry was trying to achieve.

The whole Jewish expectation of the coming of the Messiah to release them from occupation and oppression had been turned around a full 180° by Jesus' teaching. They were expecting an avenging kingly leader, a soldier like David and they got an inherent preacher concerned with peace, love and the forgiveness of sins.

Maybe even Judas was a Zealot, the most active of Jews who were the terrorists of their day and he was disappointed.

Do we have unreasonable expectations of Jesus? Do we expect him to make our lives easier rather than more challenging. Do we feel that he is not fitting our image of what he should be?

Is our Christianity more "Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam" than a willingness to share his pain of the cross in order to bring about his kingdom. Luke 9:23 (New International Version)

²³*Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."*

So Judas might have been disappointed.

Thirdly Judas might have been jealous of the special treatment of some of the other disciples. He was clearly close to Jesus in terms of being trusted with the money and he was also sitting close to him at the table of the Last Supper. The Gospels do not give him the same column inches as Peter and James, Andrew and even doubting Thomas.

Greedy, disillusioned, disappointed. None of these motives on their own really make very much sense although each of them could be used by Satan to move Judas from a position of loyalty to a position of betrayal.

But I think we have to see the betrayal as something that defies ordinary logic. In the article in the life and work, the Rev James Martin makes a very good case that there was another credible reason for Judas' betrayal.

He suggests that Judas was trying to manipulate circumstances and hasten God's timing. He was impatient with the slowness of the spread of the gospel and the lack of success in dealing with their oppressors and therefore he might have decided to bring things to a crisis point, believing that once Jesus was

arrested, he would then use his miraculous powers in such an obvious way that his role on Earth would be obvious and unassailable.

And as Martin says, when it became apparent that Jesus was not going to use his miraculous powers and that he would die or had died, his distress and grief would give a reason for Judas' subsequent suicide.

But again this is just speculation and only God knows exactly what went on in Judas's mind.

But I think we should be very aware of God's lesson here.

Lesson of the reality of the way Satan can enter into a man or woman's heart, perhaps fan the fires of hidden resentments and then persuade them to act totally against their prior will.

But I use the word persuade because I am not persuaded by the argument that Judas was a mere pawn in God's plan for Jesus' death and resurrection.

God does not take away a man or woman's free will at any time.

We believe God chooses us.

We believe God gives us opportunities to serve him but we are not robots; we always have free will to do the right thing or the wrong thing; to take God's leading or not.

It is however the wonder of God that he is looking at our lives from beginning to end timelessly and therefore he already knows what we will decide within our free will.

Is it not this partnership of God's grace and our freedom that makes the Christian life so exciting?

So what have we learned about Judas?

- the centre of his life did not contain God, or a true trust in Jesus.
- because of that, Satan had entered his will , prompting and manipulating him
- he had several motives for betraying Jesus, some clearly selfish and others misguided
- Judas made a choice and had to accept the consequences.

But you know there is another thought that should worry us all for today.

It is an extraordinary thing to my mind is that Judas could have been present with Jesus and all the other disciples throughout Jesus is ministry yet no one knew him well enough to be aware that his heart was not where his mouth was. Even at the table of the Last Supper, they were astonished to hear that someone might betray their master.

How could that happen? Was it because they were lulled into a false sense of security in the presence of the master. Was that the reason that they fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was so anguished in prayer?

Jesus said to them, watch and pray. We need just as much to be watchful and prayerful today. I'm not suggesting that we are paranoid about our fellow workers but it teaches us to be alert.

The bottom line is, if we are honest with ourselves, you and I can always see some of Judas's motives in us:

- greed where one sin leads to another in an effort either to increase the gain or to cover up;
- sometimes disillusionment with our church life;
- sometimes disappointment perhaps in our position or our influence in the church
- sometimes disappointment when God does not do what we want him to do.
- Or even, being impatient with God and his timing.

All it takes is some or all of these motives coupled with allowing Satan an influence in our lives and we are on the road to disaster.

What was the end of the story? Judas chose to betray Jesus - as God knew he would -- and reaped his just reward for allowing Satan to control his life.

But despite all the forces of evil, all the plans of the chief priests and the scribes and Pharisees, all the cries of the crowd to crucify him, all the pain and suffering on the cross, Jesus rose from the dead and in that moment bought our final salvation. Praise God!

If you want one sentence to remind you of what we have considered this morning, may I suggest - Sin betrays but Jesus saves.

Amen