

THE ONE WHO BETRAYS JESUS

A MEDITATION FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY

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MATTHEW 26:17-29

What do we know about Judas? We know that he is reviled, despised, that the very name is associated with betrayal, with avarice, with greed and duplicity.

We know that Jesus picked Judas as one of the twelve, and that he carried the surname Iscariot. But even the meaning of that name is obscure. It may mean that he was from Kerioth, which is in Judea, which would make him the only Judean amongst the disciples, since the rest were all Galileans. Or he might have been from Issachar. Or it may be a corruption of the word for Assassin. But whatever Iscariot meant to the people in New Testament times, the name today means to us the one who betrays Jesus.

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Some have said it was simple greed: the thirty pieces of silver was the motive. Others have said that Judas was a zealot, like Simon the Canaanite, and wanted to force Jesus to demonstrate that He was the Messiah, by putting Him in a situation where Jesus would have to marshal an army of angels to defend Himself. It is even suggested that Judas played a key role in God's plan of salvation, for without his betrayal, Jesus would not have died on the cross according to the scripture. Thus Judas was just a pawn in God's hand.

John is particularly harsh towards Judas in his gospel, calling him a thief and almost equating him with Satan at one point. F.W. Gingrich calls him, "the most enigmatic person in the gospel story." (Interpreter's Bible Dictionary, Vol.2, p. 1006)

Perhaps it is the way that Judas betrayed Jesus, with a kiss, which makes His treachery and deceitfulness all the more despicable. When one reads the four gospel accounts, and they do vary, one gets the picture of Judas leading the guards and the accusers of Jesus into the garden, right up to the place where Jesus was praying, and then, as though to leave no doubt as to which one of the Galileans gathered in the garden was the Christ, Judas kissed him.

Was the kiss a mockery of the love and affection Jesus felt for His disciples? Was it a farewell? Was it an attempt at reconciling what he had done?

That Jesus sensed what was to come, there can be no doubt, for He told Judas to go and do what he must do quickly, and he did.

Our text tonight shows the depths of the duplicity of Judas, who knowing full well what he intended to do that very night, would ask, "Rabbi, can you mean me?" And Jesus replied, "The words are yours."

But before that, Jesus had said that it was one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with Him.

Every time I come to the Lord's Table, I remember those words. Particularly on a Maundy Thursday, when we take the bread, and break it, and dip it into a bowl. Every one of us will dip our hands into the bowl, literally and figuratively with Jesus, for Jesus is present in the bread we break, and in the fruit of the vine into which we dip it.

I identify often with Peter, who denied Jesus three times on that awful night when He was betrayed. But am I any better than Judas, who betrayed the Messiah? I am a sinner. I have unclean hands and an impure heart. I have unclean lips.

And yet I can come to the table. I can break the bread. I can dip it into the cup. And I can partake of and be a part of the body of Christ in the world because His death upon the cross atoned for my sins, and in His grace I am freely and fully forgiven.

It would be safe to say that none of us have sinned as greatly as Judas. But it would also be true to say that none of us are any less sinners than Judas, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

We remember every time we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper His death until He comes again, just as He charged us to do. And we remember that He instituted that supper on the night in which He was betrayed.

Lord, may we never be the one who betrays you, no matter how much we may deny you by our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew right spirits within us as we come to the table, in Jesus name and by His grace. Amen.