

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 153

Good Friday Meditation 15th April 2022

Scripture Passages

Matthew 26: 14-16

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, “What will you give me if I betray him to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

John 13: 2

The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

Matthew 26: 31-34

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’³² But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”

³³ Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.”

³⁴ Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.”

Matthew 26: 69-75

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.”⁷⁰ But he denied it before all of them, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.”

⁷¹ When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁷² Again he denied it with an oath, “I do not know the man.”

⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.” ⁷⁴ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know the man!”

At that moment the cock crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

Matthew 27: 17-24

So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” ¹⁸ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.”

²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. ²¹ The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.”

²² Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” All of them said, “Let him be crucified!”

²³ Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.”

Isaiah 53: 4-5

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases ... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

Meditation

They seemed a closely knit and united little band of followers. Yes, there were the occasional little squabbles, they were caught arguing among themselves as they journeyed along the road to Jerusalem about who was to be the greatest. But that's true of all families isn't it? Surely when their loyalty was really put to the test the disciples would rise to the challenge.

And, yes, though the forces opposed to Jesus and His ministry such as the high priest, Herod, the scribes and the pharisees, were powerful Jesus had a great deal of popular support. The crowds on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem had cried Hosanna and strewed palm branches across His path, a welcome fit for a king.

A popular leader with a close and seemingly united band of dedicated followers. He would certainly stand a good chance of defeating and overcoming the opposition.

And yet within a week Jesus was to be arrested and sentenced to an agonising and shameful death by crucifixion. He died alone between two criminals, mocked by soldiers and casual passers by.

What happened to all those who supported Him? Why had they abandoned Him in His hour of need?

Betrayal is one of the great themes of all kinds of human stories. You may be familiar with the Cold War spy story, Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy which has been made both into a film and a television series. At the top of the

British Intelligence Services there are four men. And yet one of them is a traitor.

But which one? Of course this is not easy to tell at first. A good case could be made for any one of them being the traitor. But as the story unfolds slowly it becomes clear who it is and as with the best stories the traitor is not the most immediately obvious one.

Jesus died because there was a traitor within the innermost band of His disciples. This is a good, clear and satisfying explanation for His death.

Judas Iscariot is, of course, that traitor. Matthew's gospel gives the moment when Judas decided on this course of action very starkly and without any supporting explanation,

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him. (Matthew 26: 14-16)

Why did Judas do this? It is always very difficult to understand why someone is seemingly loyal to their leader then just goes and throws in their hand with the opposition.

Perhaps Judas himself did not exactly know his motivation. Perhaps it was as simple as monetary gain, the thirty pieces of silver. Or perhaps he was disappointed and wished that Jesus had a more overtly political agenda. Maybe he was jealous of Jesus and the power and effectiveness of His ministry? Perhaps he simply did not understand the spiritual perspective from which Jesus worked. We can only speculate.

John's gospel simply says that the devil put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. But that still leaves us with the human mystery of betrayal.

And if we can find a specific traitor and place all the responsibility for an evil event on him or her this in some ways lets us off the hook. We after all are not like him or her. And so we think that we are not responsible for betraying Jesus.

However, Jesus will not leave us with such an easy solution. Yes, Judas is the specific traitor. And yet the responsibility for abandoning and deserting Him lies with all the disciples. As He says to them at the Last Supper 'You will all become deserters because of me this night' (Matthew 26:31).

And then, of course, Peter, protests and thinks himself to be an exception. Although everyone else might desert you, he tells Jesus, I will never desert you.

But Peter does not know himself, his vulnerabilities or his weakness. The other disciples do indeed run away as Jesus has foretold when Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And yes Peter does continue following for the time being. But at a distance. And when his moment of testing comes, when he is asked whether or not he is a follower of Jesus he does not have the inner spiritual resources to stand firm and declare his faith in Jesus. Instead he denies three times that he knows Jesus. At this point the cock crows and remembering Jesus' prophecy of his betrayal he weeps bitterly.

When we think of the desertion and betrayal of Peter and the other disciples we may find that this strikes closer to home. We can all no doubt think of moments in our lives when we have wanted to or indeed have taken the easy and comfortable way out rather than following the difficult and sometimes

painful way of faith. A way that does not lead to the comfort of popular applause but which involves misunderstanding and opposition.

And then there are others who fail to come to the rescue of Jesus in His time of need. They are neither committed followers nor hardened opponents but still we can learn something from their failure.

First there is Pontius Pilate. He knows that Jesus is innocent and he finds Him not guilty of any of the charges placed before him. Indeed his wife tells him, have nothing to do with that innocent man because I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him (Matthew 27:19).

So Pilate knows perfectly well that Jesus is innocent. Legally he has the power to set Jesus free. And yet he chooses not to exercise this power.

Instead he passes the responsibility that is rightly his onto the shoulders of others. He asks the crowd for their verdict for which prisoner is to be released to them, Jesus or Barabbas. And when the crowds shout for Barabbas he washes his hands of his responsibility in Jesus' death.

But responsibility cannot be passed on so easily. However much Pilate may wish to pass on responsibility to the crowd the decision as to whether Jesus is to live or to die still actually lies with him.

Why then does Pilate betray both Jesus and simple justice? He is in a difficult position. His political reputation and career in the Roman Empire depends on him being able to keep order in Jerusalem at this crucial time of Passover. What if an insurrection results from His freeing Jesus?

Here again we may find our sympathies engaged. The desire to protect our own reputation and careers is very strong. What will other people think of this course of action? And so even when we know what the right course of

action is we do not take it and pretend that responsibility for this failure lies elsewhere.

And then the crowds. No doubt this is not exactly the same crowd that shouted its acclaim for Jesus a few days earlier on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And yet the way in which the crowd shifts from one extreme to another, from shouts of Hosanna to shouts of Crucify demonstrates vividly the dangers of determining our course of action by whether or not this meets with popular approval. For the popular verdict can swing wildly and very suddenly. It is not a guide to what is right or wrong.

So all these different forms of betrayal and all the underlying motives shed a spotlight on the motives of our own hearts. What is it that drives and motivates us and in the end determines the course of our actions?

For although the betrayals of Judas, Peter and the disciples, Pilate and the crowds came in very different forms they each had one factor in common. They involved placing a greater priority on something other than Jesus. That something or someone may have been money, success, pride in our own resources, reputation in the eyes of others, career.

And so we think to ourselves surely we all at different times in our lives, often in times of crisis and pressure, have had similar moments of betrayal. It is a salutary thought.

And yet when we think of this seemingly close knit band of disciples and the way that this disintegrated under the pressure of the events which we recall in this Holy Week, we remember also that this is not the last word.

For that band of disciples was put back together again although not with the inclusion of Judas. And the bonds that held these disciples together and enabled them to proclaim publicly and boldly their faith in Jesus were

strong enough to withstand all the persecutions and threats that the early Christian church faced.

What happened to put the disciples back together again, the Resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the missionary activity of the early church lies beyond the scope of this Good Friday meditation.

And yet in our readings there is one from the Old Testament, from the book of Isaiah, that is key to understanding both why Jesus died and why moments of betrayal, significant though these may be, do not need to be the final verdict in our life of faith.

Jesus died to forgive us our sins. Isaiah's prophecy of the Suffering Servant is one that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ,

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53: 4-5)

So as we acknowledge those moments when like Peter and the other disciples we have failed to follow or acknowledge Jesus may we also acknowledge and receive the fullness of God's forgiveness of our sins given to us through Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross.

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