

Wednesday of Holy Week 2023: St Mary the Virgin, Woodbridge with Great Bealings

Heb. 12: 1-3; John 13: 21-32.

“Simon Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, who is it?””

+In the name of the Father, the son and the Holy Spirit: Amen

Dating back to mediaeval times, the Judas cup ceremony is a liturgical act unique to the Maundy Thursday service at Durham Cathedral. After the foot washing, members of the clergy, gathered in quire, recreate that chilling moment we’ve just heard read from John’s passion narrative, “Very truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” (Jn. 13: 21). “Lord, who is it?” asks a perturbed Simon Peter. We didn’t expect this; God forbid that anything like this should happen to you.

The writer of John tells us that Jesus is troubled in spirit; but he is nevertheless emphatic about what lies ahead – the Son of Man is content to be betrayed and given up into the hands of wicked persons. And so we are clearly told, “Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι εἷς ἐξ ὑμῶν παραδώσει με. Very truly, teach I to you: I tell to you that one of you will hand me over / give me up. Thus says the Lord to us his Church today.

And when one sees this, as it were, acted out by Dean and Chapter, the very ones responsible for the liturgical and spiritual life of a Mother church, there is, for me, a poignancy unlike to any other experience. On one level, we are a mere dramatic audience spectating a dramatic episode in an ageless story, yet look deeper beneath the surface, and we discover the horror of our own complicity in the world’s brokenness and all that a committed engagement with sinfulness can do. We see, in fact, that we are, like Judas, “very members incorporate” and therefore enticed like any saint by evil’s lure.

Judas, Son of Simon Iscariot is depicted by the writer of John’s Gospel as a ‘thief’ to be sure, and it would be easy for us to take that descriptor, that label, draw our presumably negative conclusions about him in judgement and let that be that. What of Matthew, whose account of the same story tells us that the betrayal of Jesus happened for 30 pieces of silver? It all fits in with the *dramatis persona* we make of Judas. Yet we know despite the denouement, that Judas is also a friend of the living God: Jesus chooses him among the twelve, the synoptic writers all tell us.

This Judas, who becomes a traitor, possesses the gift of discipleship, and hence of vocation and ministry. Is that not the same as each of us? Who, then are we, to judge our brother and fellow apostle? Who are we indeed to let that be that. Dare we not hope? As St Paul encourages us in these days,

“Consider your own call... not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being may boast in the presence of God.” (1 Cor. 26 ff.)

Judas betrays Jesus; Jesus knows. And we know that when Lazarus dies, Jesus also weeps. Jesus *knows* and Jesus *weeps*. Jesus in this Good News we hear today, acquainted with grief and awaiting suffering and death, beholds the betrayer. It is a sad thing and a sinful. But it's not the end of the story to which we are called this Holy Week. Judas's story, Judas's paradox is shared by us too; we who have committed our cause to apostleship for the saving of the world the Son of Man loves so much. We share this impassioned vocation made possible, made actual, in the wondrous cross of Christ Jesus who faces betrayal head-on in his own self-giveness of body and blood.

Judas, personifying the deep and heavy burden of all our wrong can therefore be ceremonialised as a type of our reconciled humanity through all the Father does in Jesus Christ. We do not know not know why Judas makes his choice to betray, but his salvation, thankfully, is not dependent on our judgment. Rather it is solely the mercy of God in Jesus Christ that has the power to save him. And how can we who have been given and forgiven so much in our call to the same apostolate, the same nail-biting journey, not risk to hope that it may be so? We cannot. All we can do this week is pray for the grace not to desert the love whose judgment is coming upon the world, knowing that our failure to trust and Divine, unfathomed Love meet in the face of our Lord; we sinners called to be saints, sanctified by the blood of the Lamb.

This week we should be with the Lord and with Judas both. Judas this mirror of what in ourselves we would rather be blind to, rather forget about – and what we certainly would

wish no-one else to know. Jesus, the master, the best, the heavenly friend knows; he weeps; he is content for the sake of all else but love to say, “Ἄμην λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι εἷς ἐξ ὑμῶν παραδώσει με.” Very truly, I teach you, one of you will give me up.” It is my will to do the Father who sent me’s will and to be ‘given up’ into the hands of wicked persons, because I can only love you in the world so much, that you may believe that I am God whom the Father has sent.

So God willingly gives Godself up, offering all that love can do to reconcile the beloved to love’s self – the Father of lights. Whatever good we have done or evil we have suffered, tonight our grace is increased and our sins remitted in the foreshadowing fire of resurrection.

So tonight, and as we continue to sift our complicity in the sins of His Church and His world, we pray for the help to leave our preponderant judgmentalism to the empowering mercy of God, who judges all justly in the unquenchable light of his Christ.

Ultimately, we cannot know Judas’s reasons for betrayal, but in his annual commemoration in the quire at Durham, we can, as the cup is passed around the *dramatis personae* of clergy saints, know the proximity of God’s unfathomable love; that love whose power perfected in all our weakness, cleanses from every sin that the world may believe and all be one in the refracted light of the Son to the glory of the Father in the reconciling grace and power of the Holy Spirit. **AMEN**