



Continuing our preparation

The experience of Judas

An address for the Cosmic Mass for the 4th Sunday in Lent

18th March 2007 ● Rev Louise

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Laz'arus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Laz'arus was one of those at table with him. Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

John 12: 1-8

Introduction

Last week we heard Rev Trish speaking of some of the moments in our preparation to enter into Holy Week and the journey to Golgotha. This morning I'm going to continue with that idea of preparing ourselves; how do we need to make ourselves more ready and able to enter into the spiritual transformation that is available to us in Holy Week?

One of the moments that Trish took us to was the foot-washing – Christ kneeling in front of each of his disciples to wash their feet. There is a great deal happening in this simple act. He is cleansing them, giving of himself and making them part of himself. He is also providing an example, teaching them how they need to be with one another and with others to create a unity and fellowship that is founded on Christ. It is a fellowship of surrender, of service, of love in action and a placing of our life purpose and direction in the hands of Christ.

It is also a picture of intimacy and of profound connection. It is a precious time of Christ with his disciples as he is preparing himself for what he knows lies ahead. It's made even more extraordinary because we know that Judas was one of these disciples. The Christ knelt before him and washed his feet. And then we have this next passage of scripture which is our focus for today.

When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks." So lying thus, close to the breast of

Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it."

So when he had dipped the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night. When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once."

John 13:21-33

Again, we are in this scene of intimacy, eating together, sharing the bread and wine. John is lying on the breast of Jesus – it speaks of love and fellowship. It is a picture of the highest of moments – Christ is somehow binding his disciples to him, they are becoming more closely identified with him. And, within this scene we also have Judas – the betrayer.

Encountering Judas

Judas is a perplexing, disturbing and challenging figure for us. The Christ loved him, taught him, trusted him, they broke bread together – yet Judas handed him over to be crucified. When we consider the gift, the privilege of his life; he directly experienced the love and teaching of Christ, it's hard to believe that he could turn away from this.

However, here we are, on the road of spiritual transformation, and we are presented with Judas in our preparation. So it matters what we make of this.

We have heard many times that Judas represents our life energies; he is the keeper of the money. The Metaphysical Bible Dictionary describes him as the custodian of life. Often when Judas is mentioned he is described as Judas Iscariot or Judas, son of Simon Iscariot. This tells us something about what Judas is identified with. He is identified with the earthly and material aspects of life and this is where he is directing his energy and life force.

He is also described, from the first reading from John 12, as a thief. He is using this life force and energy for himself. He is taking what is not his and using it for himself and his own purposes.

Judas is seeking to appropriate Christ and use Christ for his own purposes and for himself and in doing this he separates himself from his fellow disciples and from Christ. As Mario says, in the meditation for today, we are likely to respond like Judas when we want something for ourselves. When it comes to gain, gain in whatever way – financial, mental, emotional, spiritual – we tend to forget where we must stand. So, in our identification with the lower, the earthly and we become separated from the higher.

The betrayal

When Christ makes it known that he is to be betrayed by one of his disciples, it is John, the beloved disciple who has the courage to seek out who it is.

There is a Bible passage from Matthew 26 which tells us some more about this scene and the actions of Judas.

When it was evening, he sat at table with the twelve disciples; and as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful, and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me, will betray me." Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Is it I, Master?" He said to him, "You have said so."

Matthew 26:20-23, 25

The disciples respond with a question, "Is it I, Lord?" This is a curious response – why did they need to ask? The sense I have of this is that there is something of a quality of openness and surrender. "Is it I, Lord?" There is a willingness to allow Christ in, to allow Christ to see who they are and what is in their hearts. It takes some courage to do this.

Judas asks the same question, "Is it I, Master?" He knows it is him; yet, rather than stating this and speaking the truth, he masquerades behind the question, pretending to be as the others are. He is dishonest with Christ and his fellow disciples. Christ's response is to say it is the one to whom I shall give this morsel after I have dipped it.

We read in Matthew's gospel that Judas takes his own life. The passage of scripture that immediately follows the act of betrayal is Christ's giving of the new commandment – to love one another. Judas takes himself away from this, he separates himself from Christ and from his fellow disciples and in so doing he misses out on this new and extraordinary teaching. So we have a tragedy of epic proportions. It is a painful and very uncomfortable experience for us to encounter. Responding to Judas

How are we to respond to Judas?

How are we to respond to this part of ourselves that wants to take what is not ours, that wants to use spiritual life for our own ego, that separates us from Christ in the belief that we know better?

So, often when we hear a harsh or unpalatable truth we will respond in different ways but our mind and our emotions tend to become involved. We will interpret, explain, justify in our attempt to make things more acceptable. Judas presents us with a similar challenge. A close, beloved disciple – who shared the bread and wine with Christ is willing to hand him over to be killed.

Over the years we can perhaps look back and see how we have thought and felt about Judas. When I was a child it was easy to cast him as the villain. So, we can portray him as evil and bad. How we portray him tends to define how we respond to him. If he is a villain we can condemn him, cast him out, he got what he deserved.

We might also perceive him as a victim. He was led astray, mistaken, a victim of circumstance; or perhaps it's someone else's fault. Our response in this portrayal is, poor Judas, to feel sorry for him, we might even want to save him, make excuses for him, he is not responsible. This is a much more sentimental response.

We might like to respond to Judas by casting him as the hero of the story. This is probably more prevalent in our world at the moment. He had to do it. Where would Christianity be without him, we needed him, isn't he the hero? This sounds OK, doesn't it? Judas is off the hook, not responsible; what he did was good.

It is very subtle, but in this thinking we justify our actions by the outcome. The end justifies the means. The Golgotha event occurred, Christ was raised from the dead and we have Judas to thank. So this is a justification of the betrayal by Judas. It is faulty thinking to justify an action only by its consequence rather than an awareness of what is the motivation, or in the heart of the one taking the action. This is not to say that good things don't occur from such events, just that we can have a tendency to interpret events to put ourselves in the best light, to justify ourselves and not attend to the real motivation.

In each of these responses we diminish the responsibility of ourselves and of the other. And when we diminish responsibility, we also diminish freedom and the power of our individuality. Ultimately, these responses create nothing but serve to ease our discomfort. Neither are these a good use of our mind. We tend to narrow down, become rigid and diminish our capacity to respond in real, creative and truthful ways.

We are on the road of transformation and Judas lies within us. We need to be clear and thoughtful in our response to this figure of Judas and to this aspect of our own being. How will we respond to ourselves when we err and betray the Christ? We might condemn or criticise ourselves, we might prefer to make excuses for ourselves as victims of circumstance, blame others or we might cast ourselves as the hero, telling ourselves that what we are doing is really for the best. Anything but face and deal with the truth.

Christ's response to Judas

So many of our responses to Judas and this aspect of ourselves are inadequate. They are narrow and self-serving and leave us diminished in freedom, power and individuality. How are we to respond in such a way that we will be ready to walk the road to Golgotha as Christ did?

We can look to Christ. When asked who will betray him, Christ doesn't point the finger; he doesn't condemn or criticise, he doesn't make excuses for Judas or try to change his mind. Instead, he performs a simple but powerful action.

He dips a morsel and gives it to him. We can't help but wonder if this morsel is not the bread dipped into wine. It seems likely that the elements of bread and wine are involved in revealing the truth of his identification, of what he has been harbouring within himself.

Christ offers, Judas accepts. He is offered something valuable that speaks of fellowship and unity, but he has separated himself from Christ and the disciples. As Mario used to say, where God is at work, the devil works overtime. There were mighty spiritual forces at work assisting Christ to enter into and fulfill his purpose. So we know that around him there were forces opposing him. These forces take the opportunity made available because of the state of being and consciousness of Judas.

Christ then says, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” I think that the one who while hanging on the cross can say, “Father, forgive them,” is not one to be thinking of himself at this moment either. When he says these words to Judas, he is thinking of Judas. There is love and compassion flowing from Christ as he sees what Judas has in his heart and what has happened because of this.

Conclusion

However, as Mario says, Christ lets him be. He leaves Judas free, to take this action, to be responsible for himself. This is an important step for us to take in our preparation for Holy Week. We become stronger in our individuality and more able to fulfill our purpose when we make this Christ response to the aspect of ourselves that would betray us.

To stand with Christ requires a response to ourselves and others – not with condemnation, blame, excuses, self-justification – but with compassion, power, truth and love. When we shift our identification to an identification with Christ, our individuality is alive and strong and so we able to walk the road to Golgotha and be transformed – as Christ himself was.

So shall it be.

Works from Rev Mario Schoenmaker
Used with permission
Antoinette Schoenmaker ©

The Centre in Melbourne
The Independent Church of Australia ©
email: melbournecentre@ica.org.au
web: <http://www.ica.org.au/melbourne>