

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Holy Week)

Almighty God, you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take our flesh upon him and to suffer death on the cross. Grant that we may share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY GOSPEL.....Matthew 26:45-50, KJV

Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me. ⁴⁷And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. ⁴⁹And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. ⁵⁰And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Judas] came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. ⁵⁰And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come?

(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

And, sorry to say, there is no reason to think that Judas has repented of his covetousness by the time of this evening's story. Indeed, the love of money is a very hard habit to break. And so early on in this evening's story, from the Twenty-sixth Chapter of St. Matthew, we read of the machinations of Judas:

In liturgical nomenclature, this day, Holy Wednesday, is sometimes called "Spy Wednesday," because the traditional Gospel Lesson for the day speaks of that spy, Judas. A spy is among his colleagues under false pretenses. Deceit dwells within his soul. He appears to be one of them, his friends, but in truth he is against them. He is there in order to do them in. Their goals are not his goals.

The goal of Judas was money. We do not need to speculate about this, for the Bible tells us plainly that Judas was a thief. In the story of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus with costly ointment and wiping them with her hair, Judas complains, as if in pious indignation:

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"(John 12:5, NRS)

But the truth of Judas is revealed in the very next verse:

¹⁴Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.(Matthew 26:14-16, RSV)

Treachery is afoot, then. Judas is with his brother disciples and he is with Jesus, but he is there for mischief, yea, for terrible sin.

Throughout this midweek Lent series, we have been speaking of the "touch of Jesus." His touch has been a compassionate, saving, and life-giving touch. Last week, we reversed the momentum of

the touch and pondered with sorrow the cruel touch of the guards as they so roughly handled and mocked Jesus.

Now, we return to the gentle touch of Jesus. In all his dealings with Judas, Jesus is steadily gentle. He washes the feet of Judas, including him in the apostolic company. He shares his Last Supper with Judas, declaring to him that the sacrifice of his body and his blood are meant for Judas, and for the others as well, for the forgiveness of sin.

And now, in this terrible scene near the end of our Lord's life, Jesus again deals gently with Judas. In fact, his touch is so light and warm it is a wonder that Judas, though he had been an iceberg, had not melted and repented before that touch. The touch of which I speak is a mere breath — a breath carrying the word "friend":

⁵⁰And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come?

Well, Judas has come for betrayal! But methinks Judas must have spun himself into some trance, some spell, in which he could no longer hear, nor hardly even see what was going on around him. When Jesus called him friend, did he not have that one last chance to repent? It was too late in the sense that he had already led the soldiers there to Jesus, and yet Judas could have spared Jesus however possible. He could have declined to kiss Jesus, thereby failing to signal the victim. He could have declared to the guards that he was wrong, that Jesus was not there. And if worse came to worse, Judas could have confessed to Jesus what he had done and then taken his place at the side of Jesus, saying to the soldiers, If you arrest Jesus, you must arrest me too.

But Judas does none of these things. Instead, he doggedly follows through on his plan and he betrays his Lord with a kiss.

In the total scale of human wickedness, Judas seems not to have been an awful man. He had preached and healed along with the other disciples, and there is no report that he failed at it. There must have been some nobility of soul about him because, like the other disciples, he had left home and kin and had hit the road following a poor man who preached of God's kingdom. Certainly the

man had a conscience, for he was so conscience-stricken after his betrayal of Jesus that he ended up killing himself. And, as preachers of old have noted, his overall reputation must have been good enough that when Jesus announced at the Last Supper that "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me"(John 13:21), eleven heads did not swivel and turn toward Judas, and no one shouted out, "It is Judas, Lord? Is it Judas?"

There is a warning for us here in this moderation of sin in Judas. The apostle Paul phrases the warning thus:

Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.(1 Corinthians 10:12, RSV)

Judas stood for a good long while. But then he fell. Beware of covetousness. It can bring down even one of the Twelve.

And what of the fate of Judas? The one firm theological principle that we can rely on is that Judas is in the eternal hands of the One he betrayed. And that sounds both dangerous and hopeful to me.

I think we can agree on this: When the end comes for you or for me, it will be better to be found in prayer than in betrayal. There is a recent case on my heart which moves me to this simple lesson. This past Sunday, just a few days ago, my wife Carol spent the afternoon comforting the family and friends of a dear member of the staff at The Wartburg, where Carol is chaplain. This woman was in her fifties. She arrived at work, turned to a friend and said, "I do not feel well. I think I am going to die." What did she do? She sat down and prayed, and while doing so, she died. It was stunning and sorrowful, but what a good way to be found in when Jesus summons us home: to be found in prayer.

We know not when we will fall. We know that we will fall into the hands of Jesus, and that is good whatever he decides. Yet, all things considered, let's strive always to be found in prayer and not in the various forms of betrayal of Jesus available to us. For to Jesus, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, we owe not betrayal, but our love and devotion. Amen.