PRAYER OF THE DAY, HOLY WEDNESDAY

Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at human hands and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

HOLY GOSPEL .................................................................................................................. John 13:21-30, RSV

21When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." 22The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. 23One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; 24so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks." 25So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, who is it?" 26Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. 27Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." 28Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. 29Some 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. 30So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night.

HYMN LBW 479  My Faith Looks Up To Thee

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

21When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." (John 13:21, RSV)

In his homilies on The Gospel of John 13, St. John Chrysostom of old1 notes how gentle Jesus is in dealing with the man who is about to betray him. In this passage, for example, Jesus speaks generally: he says that "one of you will betray me." Jesus knows that it is Judas, but he withholds the name. It is a kind of appeal to Judas. It lets Judas know that Jesus knows what is afoot, but

1 349-407 A.D.
does not publicly pin Judas down as the betrayer. It gives Judas a quiet chance to change his mind. No one need know what he had contemplated.

Likewise, the great opening verse to John 13 speaks of the love of Jesus for his disciples. That beautiful verse goes this way:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (John 13:1, RSV)

We should believe that Jesus loved Judas too. The text does not say, “... he loved them to the end, all except for Judas.” No, he simply loved his disciples, including Judas, and up to the last moment, Jesus tries to create space for Judas to turn from his wicked plan and to renew his life as a disciple.

But this gentleness of Jesus does not succeed. Judas does not turn from his betrayal. Chrysostom puts the matter this way:

But none of these things turned back that savage madman; yet in truth Jesus said and did far more than this, He washed his feet that night, made him a sharer in the table and the salt, a [hospitality] which is wont to restrain even the souls of robbers, and spake other words, enough to melt a stone, and this, not long before, but on the very day, in order that not even time might cause it to be forgotten. But he stood out against all. (Chrysostom, on John 12:8)

The last verse of our Gospel Reading says that Judas went out, “and it was night.” He went out to betray Jesus. In doing so, Judas headed out on a poor path in life. Spiritually, he headed into the gloom of night, for he was leaving behind Jesus, who is the “light of the world” (John 8:12). Light had come into the world, but Judas preferred darkness (John 3:19), and that cannot be good for a person’s soul. But also, in terms of ordinary human morality, Judas set out on a poor path in life when the set out to betray Jesus, for he was betraying someone who loved him, and it is not good to betray a friend. Samuel Adams², one of America’s Founding Fathers, spoke about the moral decline that begins with betraying a friend. Adams wrote this:

² September 27, 1722 — October 2, 1803 (aged 81)
He who is void of virtuous attachments in private life is, or very soon will be, void of all regard for his country. There is seldom an instance of a man guilty of betraying his country, who had not before lost the feeling of moral obligations in his private connections.

The fundamental flaw in Judas, I believe, is that he just doesn't believe anything out of the ordinary about Jesus. When all is said and done, the man is not a believer! In particular, he does not believe in Jesus as the Son of God. “Not every one,” says Jesus...

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21, KJV)

We do not need to charge Judas with an evil character. It is enough to say of him that he simply does not believe anything out of the ordinary about Jesus. And that means that Judas fails Jesus in the end. It means that Judas was dangerous to Jesus in the end. Jesus does not need half-hearted disciples. He needs better than that. He wants better than that, because there is a lot of good work that needs to be done. Jesus does not need people who count him as simply one consideration among many. Judas thought of many things. He thought of thirty pieces of silver. He thought of the opposition of prestigious people to Jesus — to the opposition of high priests and even many Pharisees. He thought of the poor — at least he claimed to think of the poor back when he protested Mary’s anointing of Jesus with the expensive ointment. Judas thinks of many fine and ordinary things. But he does not think of Jesus as God.

What I am trying to do is to save Judas from the charge of evil, make him more of an ordinary man, and yet to suggest that his willingness to think nothing extraordinary concerning Jesus makes Judas dangerous to Jesus in the end and deprives Judas of an extraordinary life.

Years of experience in pastoral counseling and at the pastor’s booth nowadays have taught me that when people express doubts about God or anger with God, it is best to start speaking to them about Jesus. Over the years, I have encountered a good number of people who tell me that they are atheists. And they launch into an impressive list of reasons why they do not believe in God. But when I ask them what they think of Jesus, they slow down some and often end up saying that they like Jesus. “Jesus is cool.” “Jesus is just alright by me.”

But I want more from them than this! I want more than that from you and me too. Judas might have thought Jesus was cool and alright by him, but in the end, Judas betrayed Jesus and ruined his own life. Judas missed out on a great
way of life. He missed out on sainthood because he did not conduct himself
toward Jesus as if Jesus was anything out of the ordinary.

Let me turn this around and try to make my point more positively. When
people come to me at the Pastor’s Booth and tell me of their troubles and
their sorrows, I find that I want to hug them close and to say this to them:
Believe in Jesus! Believe in him as God. Believe in him as the one Person in
this world worth living for. Believe in him as the One who will cause all of
these things in your life to work together for your good. Believe in him as the
one who will answer all mysteries someday and who will wipe away the tears
from your eyes. Believe in him as the One who can save you and our whole
world, when no one or nothing else can. Believe in him as One who knows you
and your life, your fears and sorrows and setbacks, and who means to make
things better for you. Believe in him as the One who will bring peace and
goodwill on earth…peace and justice to our human ways.

I know that Christians suffer setbacks and sorrows and disappointments
and illness and aging, same as everyone else. But I also believe that it is good
to be a Christian. It is good to give your heart and life to Jesus. I just want to
blurt it out: Your life will be a better one if you count Jesus as your God. If you
figure your life is about, say, a three nowadays, I believe that living for Jesus
will make it a ten! This is not what the sociologists call a “prosperity Gospel.” I
am not arguing that counting Jesus to be your God will make you rich or
happy or anything like that. I am just saying that believing in Jesus as God, not
just a man, but more deeply, as God, makes for a better threescore and ten
years here on earth. He will shepherd us into good ways of life. He will bring
us more to the fullness of our humanity. He will lead us to be better family
members and better neighbors. And in the end, he will raise us from the dead
and give us everlasting life in a great world!

The tragedy of Judas is that he missed out on the years ahead of him. He
could have lived those years with Jesus. He could have walked with Jesus in
holiness of life. And he could have helped Jesus rather than betraying the One
who is the great Savior and Redeemer of our lives, even Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and
forever. Amen.