

"JUDAS AND OURSELVES"

INTRODUCTION

If a son had been born into a Palestinian home two thousand years ago, the parents almost certainly would have considered the name "Judas" for their new child. Judas was the Greek form of the Hebrew word "Judah" and literally it means, "may God be praised". A few centuries earlier, the name had been worn with rare distinction by Judas Maccabaeus, one of the greatest generals that Israel ever produced. To wear the same name as that devout and devoted warrior was a matter of pride and prestige.

Yet, if a son were born into one of our homes today, the last name in the world that we should consider would be Judas. The name has become a synonym for treachery and betrayal.

DEVELOPMENT

The change in the significance of that name is altogether due to one man whose appearance on the stage of history was lighted by the life of another, whose name the ages have not tarnished nor dimmed - even Jesus of Nazareth. We know enough about Judas Iscariot to let those known facts serve as the outline on a canvas within which we try to paint a portrait of the man whose name always comes last in any Gospel list of disciples - "and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him".

We know, for example, that Judas Iscariot probably means, "Judas, the man of Kerioth". Kerioth was a little village in southern Judea, about thirty miles south of Jerusalem. We know that Judas was the son of Simon Iscariot. Beginning with these meager facts, I can picture Judas as growing up under the guiding hand of the prosperous, respectable merchant who was his father. I can imagine that six days a week Simon would tutor his son in the essentials of buying and bargaining and on the seventh day he would lead the boy to the synagogue to learn the laws and the precepts laid down by Moses and the Prophets. And all the while, as in any Jewish family of that day, the father would surely instill in his son a sense of seething resentment against Rome, which governed them, and hold before him the hope of another day and another order of things.

And so Judas grew up, and Simon, the father, grew older. I'll venture that one day the sign in front of a trader's mart in Kerioth changed from Simon Iscariot to Judas Iscariot. And I'll venture that Judas' store stood for quality, was a trifle expensive perhaps, but sold nothing inferior. I'll venture that Judas' name stood for respectability, that men from the countryside stopped by to ask his advice: Did he think this farm was a good buy at this price? When was the best time to sell the lambs? I'll venture that Judas was a prominent person in the local synagogue - the president, perhaps, or maybe the treasurer - for people had faith in the way that Judas handled the money.

One day Judas met Jesus of Nazareth. Something there was about Jesus that Judas must have admired - his sureness of speech and of step, his fear of no man, his vision that saw a kingdom beyond the raw realities of Jewish bondage to Rome. Perhaps after listening to Jesus talk, Judas went up and introduced himself to him and told him that he was interested in this movement that he was starting because he was looking for a new kingdom, too, and was there anything that he could do to help.

And we ought not to lose sight of the fact that there must have been something about Judas that appealed to Jesus. The Master must have seen the potentialities for discipleship in the abilities and the aggressiveness of this man just as much as in the moods and manners of Simon Peter. And to Judas, no less than the other eleven, Jesus extended an invitation: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me".

So Judas accepted. I should like to think he was sincere. At that moment, it must have seemed to Judas that this was the man for him and for his people. Not exactly the sort of King that he had been looking for, but nonetheless - what a man! When Jesus spoke, people listened. Where he traveled, people gathered. Where he ministered, power was released. And now to think that this man had asked Judas to become one of his inner cabinet. And so I can imagine that Judas took down the sign in front of his store, sold his business, turned over his synagogue financial records, and when people would raise questions as to whether he really knew what he was doing, I can imagine that Judas would say, "Just you wait and see. You watch us. One day Jesus will be King and I shall be one of the inner circle!"

I've often wondered about the conflict that must have raged in Judas' mind during the months of discipleship. There must have been those moments when Judas fairly worshipped Jesus, catching his breath at the daring of his deeds and dreams. But there must have been those other moments when Judas simply could not make sense of Jesus' words and ways. Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth." Did Judas say, "But Lord....that's just common sense to give some thought to your security". Jesus said, "If any man forces you to go with him one mile, go with him two". Did Judas say, "But Lord, you don't know these Romans like I know them. You can't trust them. The only language they know is the language of force". Jesus said, "The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him". Did Judas say, "But Lord, that is no way for a King to talk!"

However fierce the conflict in Judas' mind, there is no indication in the Gospels that Judas' discipleship was at first any frailer or any more fumbling than the rest of the disciples. In fact, the inference is that the disciples expressed their trust in Judas by electing him as their treasurer. And even at the Last Supper when Jesus suggested that one of the disciples would betray him, there was no converging of glances upon Judas, as surely would have been the case if he had been the recognized black sheep of the flock, but instead each of them began to think that it was as likely that he himself might be the culprit. "And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Lord - is it I?"

It was during Holy Week, of course, that the civil war in Judas' mind and soul really got out of hand. The week began well enough in Judas' eye. What a welcome awaited Jesus and the disciples as they rode into Jerusalem. Surely, Judas and the disciples looked upon this as the moment they had all been looking forward to, the moment when Jesus would come into his own and they would all share in the power and the glory and the kingdom. But the days went by, and Jesus was still pre-occupied with the blind and the blundering - still preaching about the power of love. Couldn't he see that the moment to strike had come?

Was it on Wednesday that Judas met Caiaphas and Annas, the high priests of the Temple? And did they josh him and jeer him for his foolish following of a king without a kingdom. The frantic impatience in the soul of Judas must have boiled over and he shouted, "All right. I'll show you whether he's a king or not. Tomorrow night at half past eight. I'll take you to him".

And did they mull that over for a minute until Caiaphas answered. "Not a bad idea. Here's a twenty dollar bill - a small token of our appreciation". "Oh no" replied Judas, "I'm not doing this for money." "Why, of course not, Judas, but surely there's something that you need." "Well, I suppose I can always use the money".

And so the die was cast. As the night came, Judas left the Upper Room and went off to meet the soldiers at a prearranged place. Then on they went to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, sure enough, was the familiar figure kneeling among those gnarled and hunchbacked trees that must have been there for centuries. And then Judas stepped out of the shadows, went to Jesus and kissed him on the cheek.

But it didn't work out at all the way that Judas had planned. This was the time that Jesus was supposed to declare himself king, but he only threw his arm about Judas and said, "Friend...." and then held out his hands to be tied by a Roman soldier and was led away.

Judas that night must have walked the corridors of hell. What had he done? Meaning to make Jesus a king, he had succeeded only in making him a prisoner, subjected to torture and to death. And those thirty pieces of silver, jingling at his side - whatever else they said about him, they would never say that he kept that blood money. When it was dawn, he stumbled into the Temple office - "Here's your money. I don't want it. I've betrayed an innocent man". The priest only shrugged his shoulders.

The indifference of the priest looked like the wall at the end of a dead-end street to Judas. And so on the day that his Master died, so did Judas.....by his own hand. And there the curtain falls on all that we know of the life of Judas.

WHY DID JUDAS DO WHAT HE DID

There has been endless discussion across the ages as to why Judas acted the way he did. Different reasons have been set forth. One often hears it said that he was simply playing a predetermined role in a divine drama and that he had no choice. I find it difficult to accept this....that God wrote every line of the script in advance and then pulled the strings to manipulate the puppet characters.

A second view holds that he betrayed Jesus because of greed. Granted that there was a noticeable strain of self-interest in Judas, still I do not think you can explain the tragedy of Judas on his basis for love for money. If Judas' single drive in life had been to feather his own nest, I question that he would ever have left his home and his possessions to follow a penniless Galilean.

The view that seems most reasonable to me is that one which has been woven into the narrative of Judas as we have developed it here this morning, that Judas was a civil war, that part of him was sincere in his discipleship but another part of him was impetuous and impatient, selfish, vain, always looking to see what there was in it for him.

And in this respect, I suppose he was not so different from the other disciples, and no so different from ourselves. How often we look at something in somewhat of the same perspective. What's in it for me. What am I going to get out of it. Some people there are who look at the church in this perspective. But there came that crucial moment in Holy Week when Judas chose to trust himself more than his leader and in the consequences of his choice his name was forever sullied.

Yes, I think if we hold up this view, there is that sense in which we cannot just look down our nose at Judas, and heap indignation and invective upon him. For this view of Judas makes us say, "I've seen that face before". Pick up your paper almost any day and you cannot help but recognize Judas. Not some scoundrel dedicated to a life of crime, but some respectable soul in whom goodness and grandeur dwelt now apprehended in his misdeeds. A stalwart business man convicted

of deceit and dishonesty. A Congressman charged with breaking laws he has helped to make. A promising young man tangled in his own maneuvers and manipulations or some college students, in this enlightened age, freely expressing their sensuality and too late, realizing what their cheap, thrill seeking has cost their families, their friends, and themselves.

All of this is not delinquency, as we use the term. This is not sin that is bred from poverty and deprivation. These are ourselves - good, privileged, well bred Americans - intelligent, respectable church people. Judas in a modern garment - betraying the highest and best in life.

And even closer to hom, do we not understand what it means to be a Judas ourselves - to affirm with our intellect and our idealism that Jesus is right, and then to act in our selfishness or impetuosity as though he were wrong? Yes, Lord, I understand that love is the law of life, and that we are commissioned to "overcome evil with good", but here is a person who has just done me a great injustice and I'm going to get even with him if it's the last thing I do! Yes, Lord, I agree that the Golden Rule is the only basis for a Christian society, and I try to teach my children to be honest, but well, here's my expense account - if I can pad it a little and here's my income tax - if I can prune it a little - well you know what I mean - I can use that money. (Which reminds me parenthetically of an observation made earlier this week by a friend. She said - if only people gave as much to their church as they claim on their tax, we'd have no problems) And yes, Lord, I know that all men are brothers, but still, I've got to keep that Negro family from moving in next door. Just think what it would do to real estate values. (You've heard it said what the Indians here on Manhattan said as they saw Hudson sail into New York Harbor. Well, there goes our neighborhood.)

I think the tragedy of Judas is an eternal reminder to all men that no man is saved by his cleverness, by his intelligence, by his possessions simply by going through the motions of discipleship. Rather, he is saved as the love of God finds response in a person's humble acknowledgement of need and want, by a simple act of trust, and then by a continuing conscious companionship in which a person honestly welcomes the grace of God and the guidance of God to every area of his life.

There is a parable of Jesus that more and more impresses me as a parable for our age and our land. It is found in the 18th chapter of Luke and read earlier in the service.

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank thee that I am not like the other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get". But the tax collector, standing far off, would not not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!'

LET US PRAY

And now, O God, confirm with in us the feelings and aspirations of these moments. Strengthen us in our convictions. Save us from all manner of self-complacency, from pride in the actual and forgetfulness of the ideal, from the contented living of mediocre lives on common levels. Give us light as we walk the pathway of every day living. We ask this in the name of Jesus of Nazareth who walked a pathway long ago that led to a cross. Amen