

## **What about Judas?**

Matthew 27:3-10; Acts 1:15-26

A sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Easter

The texts in Acts and Matthew describe what happened to Judas and how the early church replaced the one who had fallen away. What about Judas? He is an important part of the whole ministry of Jesus. How do we understand this? If you look through history, you find that the name "Judas" has become a name for "traitor," just as in Norway the word "quisling" now means "traitor," after the Norwegian Prime Minister, Vidkun Quisling, who was a traitor, a collaborator with the Nazis, in World War II.

How do we understand Judas? It's really a complicated puzzle. We have a kind of simple understanding of him, but it is far from adequate.

First of all, he was chosen as one of the Twelve. In John 6:70 Jesus says: "I chose you, the Twelve."

In the second place, like the other Apostles, Judas spent three years with Jesus, and that wouldn't be one hour a day, five days a week. They lived together in a common way all the time. They saw Jesus live, as well as heard him teach. There was no question that Judas knew all this.

In the third place, it says Judas ended up betraying him. But the important thing about him is found in John 17:12, in which Jesus says: "I have kept them, except the one." Elsewhere he prayed for them, all Twelve, not just the Eleven. And finally, most astonishingly, in Matthew 27:3 and 5 after Judas betrays Jesus, Judas comes back to the authorities, to the chief priests and elders, and says: "I want to undo it. Here's your thirty pieces of silver back. I repent. I have sinned." There it is. He turned around and repented.

The Gospels go on to describe something about him. How did he go wrong? The Gospel of John has more about him than any of the other Gospels. It says in John 12:6 that he was the treasurer. He kept the money bag, and he was stealing from it. That's the first way of trying to understand Judas.

In the account of the Last Supper in John 13:27, it says that as Jesus gave Judas the piece of bread, after that Satan entered into him. He was possessed by Satan. That's equivalent to John 17:12, where he is called "the son of perdition," which is

really the Son of Hell. And then in John 6:70: "One of you is a devil." Here's another way of understanding Judas, the idea that he is demon possessed.

In all of these places it says: So that Scripture could be fulfilled. In John 17:12 it doesn't cite a particular place in Scripture. There is a footnote that simply states: "My friend has betrayed me." In the account in Acts 1:16 a footnote gives some references to the Psalms. The account in Matthew 27:9 states what is fulfilled is Jeremiah's prophecy about thirty pieces of silver and the potter's field. A footnote gives references in both Zechariah and Jeremiah.

Finally, Mathew and Acts describe Judas' death. It's fascinating to see the increasing levels of disgust, how it becomes worse and worse. In the account in Acts 1:18 it says he fell and hit the ground and burst. In Matthew 27:5, very differently, it says he hanged himself.

If you go to sources in the Second Century one of the early church Fathers, Papias (140 A.D.), has an account of Judas' death that is quite different. It says he grew bigger and bigger until he burst, until he exploded.

As you go down through church history, you'll see the accounts of Judas' death grow. Finally, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in that part called *The Inferno*, Judas is in the lowest of the places called Hell, the coldest. In Dante the worst part of Hell is cold.

How can we account for this? How can these stories become worse and worse? In many ways it seems terribly unfair. Jesus picked him. The Devil took possession of him. And in the third place, somebody had to do it.

It's reminiscent of what Augustine writes about Eve, the mother of all. She is the one who started this whole problem of sin. Augustine writes: "O Felix Culpa!" - "Oh happy sin that led to the Savior!" Somebody had to do it.

You could make Judas out to be a victim. What could he do about it?! He was just caught. One of those instruments that had to be there in the course of history.

As people have thought about this, it has caused a lot of trouble. There have been those who have made him the scapegoat. We look for scapegoats. We make monsters out of individuals. And there are real monsters. Perhaps the greatest monster of modern times is Mao Zedong. And there was Genghis Khan, and we can go back to Judas who betrayed our Lord. We can go back to Satan himself.

The famous modern theologian, Karl Barth, in Vol. 3, Part 3 of his *Church Dogmatics*, has three hundred pages about Judas! What do we do about Judas? For Barth evil finally becomes the shadow side of the good. Evil doesn't have any real bite.

One way to get at this is to compare Judas with Peter. Peter is a typical Christian, like us. Sometimes believing, sometimes falling flat on his face. You may recall that he made a famous confession, found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. After the confession when he starts to say: "We're glad you're the Messiah who's going to start to throw out the Romans," Jesus says to him: "Get thee behind me, Satan!" (Matt 16:23).

Peter is like Judas. He falls on his face walking on the water. But most strikingly, at the trial of Jesus, described in all four Gospels, dramatically, he denies Jesus three times. It doesn't say that he repented. It says he wept bitterly, but it doesn't say he repented. In Luke 22:32 it says that Jesus prayed for Peter. "Simon, Simon behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail; and when you have turned again (repented), that you will strengthen the brethren."

It does say that Peter falls away. In a way that is almost comic in the last chapter of the Gospel of John (John 21), Peter and six others go fishing. And they catch this big haul of 153 large fish. Jesus turns to Peter (John 21:15-17) and asks: "Simon Peter, do you love me more than these?" And Peter answers: "Yes, Lord; you know I love you." Jesus said to him: "Then feed my sheep."

A second time Jesus asks Peter: "Simon Peter, do you love me?"

Peter is kind of irritated, and we can tell what Jesus is doing. He's saying I'm not sure how solid you are. Then Peter says: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Jesus says: "Tend my sheep."

Then Jesus says a third time: "Simon Peter, do you love me?"

And Peter is really irritated and says: "Of course! Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

Jesus says: "Feed my sheep."

We ask ourselves: "Was there any basic difference between Judas and Peter?" And that comes down to three things we have to sort out.

First, as we look at Scripture, we have to understand that Scripture is not to be treated in a simple way. There are all kinds of plays and dramas throughout history where Satan is used in a comic way. He's ranting and raving and has funny clothes. That's not to take Satan (or Judas) seriously.

We can be swept away by our ideas of things. We think: "It was this, or, it was that." But you can see it was not so simple as you look at the words of Scripture.

Luther provides a useful picture of how to use Scripture. He says it's the manger in which the Christ child lay.

Another useful metaphor for how Scripture works: It is like a stained-glass window, like the windows we have in our church. Through these windows the light shines, and it shines in various ways. But we must not mistake the window for the Gospel.

Sometimes it happens that the windows get dirty. Sometimes they are broken. Sometimes the pictures aren't accurate, or they have been altered by the fantasy of the one who made them. The question is: What is the Gospel that shines through?

In the second place we have to understand something about salvation. We come to the Bible with all kinds of simplistic views of what salvation is. We say: Well, Judas didn't really believe, but the others believed, really believed.

In the account of Jesus' Ascension in Matthew 28, it says the Eleven are gathered with Jesus on the high mountain, and Jesus is talking with them about going away. Then it says in Matthew 28:17: "but some doubted." That's some of the Eleven. It's not only that all of them except the beloved one fled at the crucifixion, but here, after the resurrection, after the resurrection appearances, after Judas is gone, "some doubted." It's not a matter of saying these Eleven had heroic and solid faith. They didn't.

That brings us to asking finally: What is the Gospel? What is salvation? It is based on a three-step account:

First of all, the Lord saw sin and death. The Lord saw the problem. That's something we can't see because we, as sinners, do not understand sin and we can't see it. Nor do we have a way of facing death by ourselves.

In the second place, the Lord handled it his way. We make up all kinds of false ideas about the cross and what it means in the Bible and in theology. All of those are

ways we use to impose our ideas rather than saying: He did it his way, not our way, and we don't control it.

In the third place, it's done. "It's finished," it states in John 19:30. We keep thinking: "There's something more we've got to do. We have to help God along. We have to do something in addition to what God has done." No, it's finished.

Or to put it another way, let's recall the basic promises: The Lord God has sent his Son to die and rise again for you and me. He comes to us in spite of ourselves and he snatches us. It isn't to say: "Well, I have to understand it right. Or I have to do something." No, thank the Lord it doesn't depend on us. We have in him, in what he has done for you and me in making us his own, life forever. Amen