

Judas, who betrayed him

A sermon for the Season of Lent

In 1939 Winston Churchill, while talking on the radio about Russia, said: **"It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."** This is also a good description of Judas. **Judas is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.**

First, what about his name? We know the name Judas is a common name in the Hebrew tradition. Another one of the Twelve is also named Judas. What does "Iscariot" mean? You can take the first part of the word, "*Is*" means "man," and then from "*cariot*," which would mean Judas is from Judea, would be the only one of the Twelve from Judea. Then we can take *Iscariot* and translate it back into Aramaic, and the word means "liar," or "the crooked one," "the wrong one." Or we could take what *Iscariot* sounds like in Latin, *sicarius*, a short sword. And the people who were Zealots, that is the Jews who were rebelling against Rome, carried short swords, and they were called Zealots. We really don't know. Judas was one of the Twelve, and the first part of **the riddle**, if we may go with that quote from Churchill, is how could Jesus have chosen him. When you think of it, it makes no sense. This man Judas betrayed him! And there are those therefore who have said Judas never existed. Such a wild story; it's just a fantasy made up of legend. But really it's the opposite. This kind of story of someone who betrayed his own master like this is too radical to be invented. It has to be true. And we have to think about in what sense its true because the story has problems.

Here is someone who had been among the seventy (there were first seventy and then he chose the Twelve), and according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, they spent three years with him, learning from him, seeing what he did, and were loved by him. And yet, Judas betrayed him. We also know Jesus knew people; he could see right through them. How could he not see this? It's a real **puzzle**.

When you come down to it, when we have the account from John 13:26 in the Upper Room at the Last Supper, there Judas is sitting, maybe not right next to Jesus, but not too far away, because Jesus could give him a piece of bread that he had dipped. And then Jesus said to him: "What you do, do quickly" (John 13:26). It wasn't as if he didn't know what Judas would do. Why

did he choose somebody who was going to destroy the work? That is however not the biggest problem.

The biggest problem is that Judas became the agent of Satan. John 13:27 says that when Judas had received the bread that had been dipped, Satan entered into him. That meant that Jesus, so to speak, had a snake within his own group, someone who was going to do him in.

We ask how that could be? Augustine used a phrase, "the happy sin" to describe the fall of Adam and Eve because if there had not been sin, there would have been no need for a Savior. Unless you have evil, you cannot have good. But we could also see the whole thing as a kind of puppet show. Jesus says here and in other places: "The hour has not yet come" (John 2:4, 7:30, 8:20), and then he says, "The hour has come" (John 12:23, 17:1). It is as if there is a certain kind of fatalism. Somebody had to do it, Judas was stuck with it.

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, when the church met as the universal council to ask how Jesus is truly God and truly human at the same time, the answer was: "Unmixed and undivided." That is, as soon as you start to divide divinity and humanity as if they are two, you're in trouble, and as soon as you try to mix them, you're in trouble. Don't go there.

What do we do? Jesus seems to make a mistake. But we should not psychologize these accounts. These are not to be thought through as though we were trying to interpret the mind of Jesus. We get in trouble when we try to go beyond "unmixed and undivided."

What we are dealing with here is not some kind of history in the usual sense. This is theology. This is describing God working. He really was involved in our life and our problems, including suffering and death. But "my ways are not your ways" (Isa 55:8-9). As soon as we try to analyze it, don't go that way! That's what the Council of Chalcedon said.

That's the riddle, wrapped in a mystery. This leads to the question of why Judas did this? After all, he had spent at least three years with Jesus, knowing him, learning, and being loved by him. Yet he was the traitor. It says in John 12:5 that when the woman came and poured rich ointment on Jesus' feet, Judas scolded her and said: "You could have taken that three hundred denarii

and given it to the poor." Then comes the comment: "For he was a thief and had the money box" (John 12:7). That he had the money box is also mentioned in John 13:29. But it seems ridiculous that thirty pieces of silver – not a small amount but not a great amount – is worth betraying somebody who is your friend and Lord. To be sure, it fulfills the statement about "thirty pieces of silver" from Zechariah 11:12. That reference doesn't seem to adequately explain the thirty pieces.

It is also true that the Twelve had real hopes that Jesus was going to restore the kingdom the way it had been under King David. They had been living under the harsh rule of Rome for a long time, sixty years or so at least, and they didn't like it. And here was somebody they thought who was going to throw off the Roman yoke, but it didn't happen. In fact, it looked like the whole thing was going to pieces. And it could be that Judas was disillusioned. After all, he was a Zealot, and these Zealots were very much a problem for Rome because they were always trying to stir up a revolution. What Judas was trying to do was force Jesus' hand. In Matthew 26:49 Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, and the soldiers of the chief priests and the elders seize Jesus. One of the men with Jesus cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest, and Jesus says: "Put your sword back. . . Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53). Judas betrayed Jesus yet he seems to be like a puppet, which is **the enigma**.

After all this, it says in Matthew 27:3 that Judas repented. He came to the Jews with the thirty pieces of silver and threw them on the floor and said, "I don't want it to happen." And they said, "Hey, that's your problem. It's all done." And they took the money and bought a place to bury him, because he then went out and hanged himself. It is a little bit different in the Book of Acts, where it describes his end. Acts 1:18 and 19 say that Judas bought a field with this money and he fell headlong into it and burst open. These accounts of Judas' death are quite different.

Yet throughout Scripture we see how Judas is increasingly painted in dark or darker terms. In the Gospel of John 6:70 Jesus, speaking to the Twelve, says: "And one of you is a devil." Then in John 17:12 he talks about all those who have stayed with him except one, who is "the son of perdition." In the lists of the Twelve, Judas is always listed last. He was the one who betrayed Jesus, and we use ourselves the term "so-and-so is a Judas."

In World War II the Norwegian Minister of Defense collaborated with the Nazis against his own countrymen. His name was Vidkun Quisling. His last name, Quisling, became a name for any and all those who betrayed other Norwegians to the Nazis. That word “quisling” has become a term for traitor even if people today don’t know who he was or what he did. But he was the one who betrayed his people.

Judas then became “the one who was evil.” Even though it says he repented, it was not the kind of repentance that we find in Peter. We recall how Peter had said: “I won’t deny you” (Matt 26:35). And then he did, of course. But later, after the resurrection, he was restored (John 21:15-17). As he had denied Jesus three times, he was restored three times: Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep. There’s a difference between repentance and repentance.

In fact, there are two words, attrition and contrition. There’s repentance where I’m sorry I got caught, and then there is repentance where I’m sorry and I turn around and don’t it again. In the case of Judas, it would seem that he could not and did not do what Peter did. Peter could be seen as the equivalent to Judas. He denied his Lord, but when he turned, the Lord restored him.

That brings us to the last part of the **enigma**. What about Judas and his role? On the one hand, he seems to be like a puppet. On the other hand, he is the worst human being of all time. Judas wasn’t Satan, but Satan wasn’t a human being. Judas was the one who betrayed Jesus himself.

Karl Barth wrote at length about Judas. The question he asked is: Could Judas have been forgiven? We, in our modern sentimental way, would have forgiven already and forgiven everything. But we shouldn’t be too quick to throw away the question: What about justice?

In a novel by Dostoyevsky called *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the brothers, Ivan, raises the question: If to save the world, you have to kill one innocent child, is that justice? What about justice? What about forgiving Stalin, Hitler, and Mao Zedong; together they killed about 200 million people.

We say: "God can forgive." But wait a minute. What about all the terrible things that happened? What about justice? What about Mao? Stalin? What about Judas?

It's not as if the Lord says: "That's all right. It doesn't matter." Or: "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely Players" (Shakespeare's comedy, *As You Like it*). Bring down the curtain: Wasn't that "interesting." No.

We come back then to the same kind of answer that we had for the first part, **the riddle**. That is to say, we are not able to ask and answer the question about evil. Again, as with the Council of Chalcedon, don't go there.

The danger is that we judge God. We decide whether God did it right or not, and there's nothing more wrong than judging God. In fact, there is nothing more sinful than that we think that we know God could have done it better or should have done it another way.

What we do know is that the Lord has promised for those who are in him that there is salvation, and what happens to others we don't know and leave it up to Him completely. That is what it means to live by faith alone, that we trust in Christ, and for all the rest we are free because he is the Lord and runs the universe. Hold to Christ and for all the rest be uncommitted. Amen