

JUDAS MISSED THE MESSAGE

Each year as Lent begins we see various versions of the Passion story, usually overdone for my taste. The various characters described are always vivid and lifelike. One character is always focused upon: Judas. Each story seems to depict Judas as the heavy. We immediately know it as the mood builds, and when he finally performs his evil deed, we expect it. When later, we read that he takes his own life; we feel somehow that justice has been served.

But as with most scriptural characters, I have questions: “Judas, what is your story?” Why would you do it? How did you happen to become the evil one? We are often reluctant to ask that question. We prefer to see him as a caricature.

Even today, think of it. Don't we often look at people from that perspective? Good or bad, right or wrong? Yet, when someone says, “Wait a minute. Let's look at this more closely. Maybe there's more to that person's story,” we are uncomfortable. “We want a simple explanation. Just good or bad – right or wrong. No gray areas.

It seems like the Biblical writers each painted a picture of Judas as purely evil – insisting that he was pre-ordained to be wicked. No word of compassion or sympathy written about him. Yet I keep wondering – what's your story, Judas? Who are you? Your name was one of the most common during Jesus' time, named for the most forceful leader, Judas Maccabees, who won freedom for the Jews a century and a half before Jesus' time and held it for a time before Rome overtook them. He was honored and revered and many Jewish sons were named for him:

1. There was Judas of Galilee who mounted a futile effort against Rome, and in the aftermath of the rebellion founded a group called the Zealots, who were just what the name implies.
2. There was Judas, the brother of Jesus mentioned several times in the New Testament.
3. There was one to whom Paul went after his conversion on the Damascus road.
4. There was another of the twelve named Judas, though in the aftermath of the events, they called him Thaddeus.
5. And then there you are: Judas Iscariot, little known but for a few angry words written by appalled men.

Judas, I wonder, could you have been that bad? After all, Jesus chose you, had great confidence in you and high expectations, even trusted you to carry the purse for the others - kind of an informal, unbonded treasurer.”

If we read between the lines, one tradition suggests that Judas Iscariot had indeed been a Zealot - and then he met Jesus. He followed Jesus loyally, joining him on his dangerous march to Jerusalem. He was enthused about the coming of the new kingdom. But perhaps there was something else: could there have been a growing disappointment? A gnawing frustration that Jesus had influence - but did not seem to use it; had power - but refused to use violence. Jesus had the opportunity to stir people to revolt against Rome, but was passing it by.

Against all this, we are told that Judas went to the officials of Rome, and for 30 pieces of silver, betrayed Jesus. But again, it's just not that simple. Money was not the motivating force. The Gospel writers used what was a well-known symbolic Hebrew expression meaning “blood money.” But 30 shekels of silver was but a few dollars at best. Certainly not a reason for betrayal!

And think of it. Almost immediately after the betrayal, we are told Judas repented, and was so deeply sorrowful and filled with such remorse that he took his own life. This was hardly an act of an insincere and selfish betrayer.

So what's the story? Could it be that he was loyal to a fault; believed so passionately in Jesus and yearned so much for his people's freedom that he might have concluded, “If only Jesus will use his power and incite people to follow him, they could be turned against Rome?”

Could he perhaps been trying to force Jesus' hand? Force him to call the people to arms? If that's what he thought, of course he was wrong. If that was the choice, Jesus did not respond as he

hoped.

Why bring this up at the beginning of Lent? I think there is something of Judas in all of us. Judas missed the message. He was fascinated by Jesus, drawn to his charismatic presence, excited by the prospect of being a Disciple, and perhaps even humbled that Jesus would trust him with the purse. But he only heard half of what Jesus said. He heard Jesus speak of a kingdom, power and glory, but he missed the part about the way to the kingdom is by way of the cross.”

He must have applauded when Jesus spoke of certain triumph in God’s love, but missed his description of how love forms within our lives by turning the other cheek, going the second mile or returning good for evil.”

We humans are good at that sort of thing. We have selective hearing. We listen carefully when our desires or opinions are being expressed, but less so if something makes us uncomfortable. We laugh at our children for not listening, but we do the same with God. We miss the most important messages.

I look at the news today from around the world and I see fighting in every corner, and then I watch people kneel for prayer many times a day and worship on Sunday morning celebrating a peacemaker, yet out we go then and trudge back off to war. Someone has missed the message.

Having called Jesus’ hand, and discovering that Jesus was really going to live what he had preached. Judas was truly stricken with conscience. It is written that he repented, admitted he did wrong, but that’s all he did. Well, not quite nothing. He killed himself. But again, he missed the message. Real repentance is not just admitting you are wrong. It’s accepting God’s forgiveness and turning your life around - doing something about it. Judas missed that message.

This Lenten time offers us an opportunity to look carefully at our own journey. Are we really listening to what Jesus says about how we are to live our lives? Have you heard his invitation - to exercise the kind of power that does violence to no one and is able to love and accept everyone? All of his children?

Judas was sincere, but it’s not enough. There must be more: an openness to the truth; an eagerness to grow; a childlike wonder, a readiness to go on with life - at any cost. How wonderful it would have been if, when discovering he had missed the message, Judas had gathered himself up, gone and reached out to help others, extended a loving hand as surely as Jesus had reached out to him.

Malcomb Muggeride once wrote, ”Both Mother Teresa and I visited Calcutta many years ago. We saw the wretched people there and shivered. She stayed and did something about it. I went home - and did nothing.

In life’s great moments, in life’s small moments, are we missing the message? Amen.

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