

Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, fascinates us. Some of us might confess that we find him the most intriguing of all the disciples. He is the accident we pass on the highway, to which our eyes are drawn even as we prepare to be repelled by what we see.



Perhaps it's the rule of drama that finds villains more interesting than heroes. Most novelists confess that they'd rather develop their bad characters than their good ones, because it's so difficult to make the good ones interesting. I wonder if this is because there's a little of the villain in every one of us, so when we watch the villain in action we see some elements of our own character, slightly or largely magnified? Most of us are wise enough to know, when we pass a derelict soul, that it is "there, but for the grace of God, go I." So when we look at someone who has done a quite monstrous thing, we ask ourselves how it is that he or she came to such a place—and perhaps, sometimes, how it is that we did not.

What made Judas do what he did? What circumstances, what mounting influence, or what subliminal darkness in his heritage made Judas do what I fear I'm capable of doing, but yet have never done?

As dramatically evil as is Judas's act of betraying Jesus, most of us feel some measure of sympathy for him. Some people feel that Judas didn't get a fair break. After all, the Christian faith declares that Jesus was crucified as part of the divine plan for the salvation of our human race. If that be so, wasn't Judas essential to the unfolding of the plan? Was he, in fact, a kind of divine catalyst? Some have even said that perhaps he should be praised for fulfilling the ugliest of roles in this eternal drama.

Jesus himself spoke to the question. "For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!" (Mark 14:21). One thinks also of Jesus saying to his disciples at another time, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!" (Luke 17:1). I think Jesus is telling us, in very pragmatic fashion, that in a world of sin many tragedies will happen; but each person can decide for himself or herself whether or not to be the instrument of tragedy.

I have great sympathy for Judas, not only because he is a pathetic figure, but because the seed of divine betrayal is in each of us. And while I really cannot imagine myself performing the Judas-deed, I know my capacity for my own kinds of shame and betrayal. Nevertheless, I don't believe Judas was helpless; I don't believe he was simply a divine pawn. I believe he could have resisted evil, and that he could have been a disciple of honor, with his story continuing into the book of Acts, and on into legend and tradition.

So why did Judas do it? You remember the story. Judas Iscariot was one of the disciples, a person chosen by Jesus as a leader. He was part of that small and uniquely blessed group who lived with the Master day and night for perhaps three years, sharing in our Lord's struggles and triumphs, and feeding daily on his teachings. Then one day he slipped away from the disciples to drive a bargain

with the enemies of Jesus.

Judas had heard that the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to be rid of Jesus. He went to them and settled on a means of getting Jesus into their hands quietly. They agreed on a price, and the deal was closed.

Sometime later, the disciples gathered with Jesus in an upper room, to celebrate the Passover. In the course of the meal, Jesus said that one of the little group would betray him. It was an astonishing statement, quite beyond belief. But the disciples responded in a remarkable way: Each one asked, with obvious anxiety, “Lord, is it I?” (Matthew 26:22 KJV). Whatever immaturities they may have shown at other times, at this moment they were spiritual enough to recognize their personal frailty and their capacity for sin.

Jesus and Judas then had a brief conversation, and Judas left the room. Since Judas was treasurer of the disciples, the others assumed that he was going out to buy additional supplies or perhaps to do something for the poor. Not long afterward, Jesus and the remaining disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed. It was without doubt the most significant prayer offered in the history of our human race. As the group prepared to leave the garden, a band of soldiers appeared, with Judas among them. The moon was full, providing quite good vision, but to prevent the possibility of error, Judas had arranged a signal that would identify Jesus to the soldiers, so the arrest could be made expeditiously. He chose a practical signal; in those days, disciples customarily greeted their teachers by placing hands on the rabbi’s shoulders and kissing him.

So Judas had said, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him” (Matthew 26:48). One would expect that a betrayal kiss would be as brief and uninvolved as possible, but in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the Greek word *kataphilein* is used—a word that means to kiss fondly and repeatedly. Why did Judas kiss his Lord with such intensity? Was it only to heighten the irony of his signal? Or was it because, once he faced his Lord, he was overwhelmed by the terror of his deed and by his latent devotion to his Master?

The authorities quickly took Jesus to trial, persecuted him, and crucified him. And Judas was the catalyst in the story, making his name forever afterward the classic synonym for traitor. What made him do it?

I venture that thousands of artists—some of them classic practitioners and vast others unknown—have painted pictures of Judas. As I said earlier, he fascinates us. Always, of course, the artists try to show the evil in his face. But he didn’t start life as an evil human being, any more than any of the rest of us. Once, he was somebody’s baby, a helpless, lovely thing that a mother cuddled and a father juggled proudly in the air.

I use such language with some assurance, because his parents gave him an honored, beautiful name, Judah or Judas. In those days, a Jewish boy could have no finer name. It had a jubilant, spiritual tone, meaning “praise to God.” This was the name of one of the twelve sons of Jacob (Israel), and the name of the greatest tribe, the one from which King David came. It was the name also of Judas Maccabaeus, the great Jewish hero, and of Judas of Galilee, another hero, from the generation just preceding. Jewish parents of the first century could hardly speak a higher hope for a child than to name him Judah or Judas.

No one can prove all that is in a name, but I’ve long noticed that we tend to live up—or down—to the name we are given. Give a girl a name with intimations of beauty, and she is likely to lay claim to it; give a boy a “real boy” name, and he generally embodies it. So Judas grew up with a great name, and perhaps with equally great expectations. Then, somewhere in his young manhood, he met the challenging young teacher from Nazareth. He listened to Jesus, and gave him his heart.

Mind you, I fully believe that Judas gave Jesus his heart. I don't feel that he was a tentative follower. No doubt he joined Jesus with mixed motives; I'm fully convinced that we human beings rarely if ever do things with utterly pure motives. But I believe Judas joined Jesus' band with sincere, devout commitment—as good, I venture, as any other of the disciples.

Jesus seems to have received Judas with high expectations. Judas was clearly a capable man, and he got a place of leadership among the Twelve. Specifically, he was held in such trust that he was made treasurer of the group—a tribute to both his judgment and his evidences of integrity.

And there's more. At the Last Supper, John's Gospel gives us the impression that Judas was seated in the position of the most favored guest, at the Master's left, because Jesus handed the sop (the dipped bread) to Judas, and at a Passover feast for the host to make up the sop and hand it to a guest was a mark of particular honor. It's also clear that Judas was seated near enough to Jesus that they were able to carry on a quite private conversation. Yet Judas became the traitor. Why did he do it? Some try to justify Judas's deed by reasoning that Judas didn't really intend to betray Jesus, but that he wanted only to force him to act. They say that Judas, too, was a Zealot—there is tradition to this effect—and that Judas felt the time had come for Jesus to organize his revolution. According to this theory, Judas believed that if Jesus were arrested, he would be forced to commit himself, and the revolution would begin. This is an ingenious defense of Judas, but it depends almost entirely on imagination. There's no real support for it in the record of the Scriptures.

Others have found an interesting theory in Judas's surname. "Iscariot" suggests that Judas came from Keriath in Judea. This would mean that Judas was the only Judean among the disciples; all the others were Galileans. The Judeans spoke a different dialect and were a stricter people than the Galileans. Perhaps Judas felt shut out because of the difference in language, customs, and tradition, especially since he was the only one of his kind in the group. It's very easy for a loner to become antisocial and bitter if he or she doesn't take care. This seems to me to be a possible contributing factor in Judas's story, but I don't think it is a major issue.

From what I understand of human personality and of the principle of sin, I think the important issue in Judas is that of strength and weakness. Always speak of a person's strength and weakness in the same breath, for most likely they are opposite sides of the same coin. As someone has wisely noted, "Temptation commonly comes through that for which we are naturally fitted."

It does, indeed. In this regard, the story of Judas is the story of all of us. If a person's strength is a fine mind, the Waterloo will be at the issue of the mind. If personality is the strength, it will almost as surely be the peril. Is a person impressive for disciplined habits? Then know that discipline itself may someday be the point of downfall. We are more likely to destroy our souls at the height of our talent than at the level of our ordinariness.

So what was Judas's strength? Pretty clearly this: that he handled money well. To use a phrase from our common speech, he knew the value of a dollar. No doubt that's why he was made treasurer of the disciples. This was a significant compliment. After all, Matthew was a tax collector, a person who dealt all the time in money, and most of the rest of the group were small businessmen, people instinctively proud of their ability to make good use of limited resources. Yet it was in such a group that Judas's ability with money was recognized as so outstanding that he was chosen as treasurer.

But if handling money was Judas's strength, it was even more dramatically his weakness. The evidence is painful and inescapable. The point is implied in Matthew's Gospel (26:6-16) and plainly stated in John's (12:1-11). As Matthew tells the story, an unnamed woman interrupted a meal where Jesus was a guest and poured a very expensive perfume on him. The disciples "were angry"

because of her wastefulness. Jesus, however, rebuked the disciples, explaining that the woman had done a deed of sincere devotion, and that her act was a preparing of his body for burial. Matthew goes on immediately to say, "Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' " (Matthew 26:14-15). I think there is no doubt that Matthew sees the anointing event as the act that impels Judas to his work of betrayal. As Matthew says, it was "then," after the bitter incident, and resulting from it, that Judas went into action.

John, as I said, is more direct. As he tells the story, it was Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who anointed Jesus with the expensive perfume; and it was not just the disciples in general who objected, it was Judas in particular. Putting the two accounts together, I suspect that all the disciples murmured, but Judas gave specific voice to their feelings. He was true to his skills; he knew the value of the ointment, and he calculated what could be done with such a sum. It could have been sold, he said, "for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor." Since a denarii was a day's wages for a laboring man, this ointment represented essentially a year of a laborer's wages.

But John's Gospel doesn't let the matter lie there; it adds an editorial comment. Judas said what he did, John tells us, not because he cared for the poor, "but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it" (12:6).

Whatever case one wants to make for Judas (and I am sympathetic, because Judas and all humanity and I are kin), certain facts seem to me to be compelling. Judas was fascinated by money and was stealing from the apostolic purse. So when he was rebuked by Jesus, he went out to betray him. It seems to me that John's Gospel is telling us that Judas's act of betrayal had antecedents, as do all of our deeds, both good and bad. The betrayal had its conception in a love of money, and it got its final impetus in the scene of anointing. On that occasion, perhaps two things happened. For one, Judas saw again how "unrealistic" Jesus was in his values; what hope could there be for a leader who saw things as Jesus did? Then, the rebuke. When we are corrected, whether by parent, teacher, spouse, friend, or foe, we can learn from it or we can turn angry and inward. Judas did the latter.

So he sold his Master for thirty pieces of silver. There's irony in the sum; this was the going price, in those days, for a slave. It was a pathetic, tragic bargain—the kind of bargain that would be driven only by someone who knew the value of a dollar. It is always at the point of our strength that we are most susceptible to error, and at the peak of our ability that we are most in danger of destroying ourselves.

What is the end of Judas's story? The New Testament gives two reports (Matthew 27:3-10; Acts 1:16-20), but I think they are nothing other than varying insights on the same data. When Judas realized what he had done, he hurried to the priests to see if he might call off the whole, bad bargain. They laughed at his appeal. Judas then threw the thirty pieces of silver to the ground at their feet. At last, at last, Judas was getting his values straight. But not quite. Because then he went out and hanged himself.

I hurt with Judas in his remorse. Many of the things we do wrong can somehow be made right. But now and again we take steps that can never on this earth be retraced. Of this I'm sure: Judas should have gone to Jesus with his remorse, for it was against Jesus that he had sinned. Even if Jesus were already on the cross, Judas should have clung to the tree in loving sorrow. And as Christian theology understands it, Judas needed most of all to understand that his sins were not dealt with by hanging himself, but by trusting the One who was dying in his stead at Golgotha.

And this brings us to a question over which people have speculated since the first century: Was Judas lost? Or will we see him in heaven? George MacDonald, the nineteenth-century novelist (of

whom C. S. Lewis said, “I regarded him as my master” because of his closeness to the Spirit of Christ), said in his *Unspoken Sermons*, “I think, when Judas fled from his hanged and fallen body, he fled to the tender help of Jesus, and found it—I say not how” (quoted in *The Wind from the Stars*, Gordon Reid, editor, HarperCollins, 1992; page 173). Origen, the third-century philosopher and theologian, found a “how”: He said that when Judas realized what he had done, he hurried to commit suicide so that he might meet Jesus in Hades, the abode of the dead, and there bare his soul and seek his Lord’s forgiveness (Origen, *Sermons on Matthew*, 35, cited in William Barclay, *The Master’s Men*, Abingdon Press, 1959; page 80).

I choose just now to leave the soul of Judas with his God, walking quietly from the place where a human being meets his or her Maker. As I slip away, I remind myself that Judas was a very able human being, and that it was at the point of his strength that he destroyed himself. I will remember that so many of our worst deeds and errors are at the place of our greatest strengths.

Judas helps me to understand some things about myself, and to seek God’s mercy and strength. You, too, perhaps?

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