

Sermon on the person of Judas Iscariot by Rev. David Kent

Well it's really good to be with you all once again continuing our sermon series on people of the Bible.

I obviously did something to offend Julie because today I have the task of talking about Judas – so let's begin. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

If you haven't already done so, I recommend a visit to the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona.

The Sagrada Familia is the wonderful and unique cathedral designed by the amazing Spanish Architect Antoni Gaudi. Amongst the innumerable figures embellishing the outside of the building, there is an incredible sculpture of Judas kissing Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.



Here is a picture of that sculpture.

I'm not sure what Gaudi's interpretation of the kiss of betrayal was, but just look at the intimacy of this embrace. When we kiss someone and at the same time place our hand behind their head or neck it places the kiss on a totally different level doesn't it? Placing your hand behind the neck of the person you are kissing conveys a deep and loving relationship with that person. Even a passion.

Some have dared to suggest that Jesus betrayal was so much part of God's plan that Jesus actually asked Judas to betray him. Make of that idea what you will, but the clinch depicted here by Gaudi would certainly justify such a notion.

For the most part, Judas is accredited with betraying Jesus either because he was inspired to do so by the devil himself, or in order to earn a reward of 30 pieces of silver. So much so that to this day, the word Judas is synonymous with betrayal, as is the term '30 pieces of silver' which conveys the same message of someone receiving personal gain for an act of treachery. Both terms are used to convey maximum disdain.

I tried to put myself in Jesus' shoes just for a moment to try to imagine what that kiss felt like. A kiss that was an intimate greeting between close friends, but in this case with fatal consequences. Jesus knew he was going to be betrayed and spoke about it at the Last Supper. He also knew who was going to betray him and encouraged him to do what he had to do.

I often wonder why the 'powers that be' needed a betrayer because they surely knew who Jesus was and he was well known around town. In fact wasn't it partly because of his popularity that led them to want to destroy him? Perhaps it was because they sent soldiers out to arrest him and they were not as familiar with Jesus. So it has always seemed unnecessary to me. But who am I to question God's plan?

If we just go back in time 3 years, there is no mention in any of the gospels about Jesus calling Judas to follow Him, as he did with the others. So, we have no information about how or why that occurred, nor about his family or his occupation. However, we do know that Judas was a member of the twelve so he was selected by Jesus himself and he must have gone about with Jesus carrying out their ministry of healing and reconciling. So, he was intimately involved with the miracles being performed and must have enjoyed a close relationship, even friendship, with his eleven companions who lived together, ate and slept together wandering around the countryside together.

We can only speculate what motivated Judas to his act of betrayal when he was so closely involved with this special band of followers of the Messiah.

To suggest that 30 pieces of silver would be sufficient incentive rather allows for the idea that he had some much deeper reason for wanting Jesus removing from the scene.

Was it that Jesus was increasingly speaking about his imminent death and so Judas could see it all coming to an end anyway? Was it that Judas was of the opinion that the promised Messiah was meant to be a warrior who would rid them of the Roman occupation and so was disappointed by this gentle man who hated no one and harboured no feelings of anger or violence?

We know that Judas was the treasurer of the twelve and scripture tells us that he used this position for personal gain. John's gospel tell us that "he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself

to what was put in it.” In another scene from John’s gospel, Jesus’ friend Mary takes a large quantity of expensive perfume, pouring it over Jesus’ feet and wiping His feet with her hair as an act of worship. We’re told that Judas objected to Mary’s behaviour asking “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages”. It could be argued that Judas’s intentions were good – until John tells us that Judas didn’t say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. John inferring that he fully intended to skim the money from the money bag. Even then, Jesus didn’t rebuke Judas but simply justifies Mary’s intentions.

So Judas has a bit of a history of failing to understand the bigger picture of Jesus and what he was about. According to Matthew’s Gospel, Judas repented after seeing Jesus condemned to death and returned the silver before hanging himself.

According to the book of Acts he bought a field with the reward for his betrayal and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. Not a pretty sight but a fitting end you might think.

In Dante’s Inferno Judas appears in the deepest chasm of hell alongside Julius Caesar’s assassins Brutus and Cassius.

In the apocryphal Gospel of Judas, he is depicted as a close collaborator with Jesus. In the writings it is Jesus who instructs Judas to betray him to the authorities so that Jesus’ spiritual self can escape from the material body in which he is trapped.

And I just love this story.

According to the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, which was probably written about the 4th century AD: after betraying Jesus, Judas was overcome with remorse and went home to tell his wife. His wife was roasting a chicken over a spit on a charcoal fire at the time and Judas told her that he was going to kill himself because he knew that Jesus would rise from the dead and when he did he would punish him. Judas’ wife laughed and told him that Jesus could no more rise from the dead than he could resurrect the chicken she was cooking. According to that gospel, the chicken was immediately restored to life and began to crow. Upon which Judas immediately ran away and hanged himself. Perhaps that gives us some indication as to why the Gospel of Nicodemus never made it into the Bible as we have it today.

The fact that there are two different accounts of Judas’ death in the Bible, one being that he hanged himself and the other that he fell in his field splitting himself open actually led CS Lewis to completely change his view of the Bible. He said that this single inconsistency was the turning point in his journey from literalist to a more liberal reading of the Bible that clearly includes political agendas and human errors.

So what do we conclude from all of this information about Judas?

How do we compare the betrayal of Judas with the betrayal of Peter who denied knowing Jesus three times in order to save his own skin and yet went on to be the cornerstone of the emerging church? So where does all this leave us?

Well when it comes to our feelings about Judas, we generally fall into two camps.

On the one hand we have those who believe he is the villain of the passion story and that he rightly deserves to be punished.

On the other hand we have those who believe that he is simply an essential character in God’s plan and therefore not totally responsible for his actions and deserving of our sympathy.

You might even have a foot in both those camps.

Because God is love, and because forgiveness is at the core of our Christian belief, we know that Judas has been forgiven. Therefore we can safely assume that if committing the crime of betraying the Son of God to his executioners can be forgiven, anything we might do under the banner of sin will safely be forgiven.

Judas might be the gold medalist, but we are all participants in the game of committing sin. And we are all in receipt of God’s forgiveness. Thank God.