

## **ORDER OF SERVICE**

**Betrayal and Denial** (John 18:1-27)                      7.3.2021                      Michael Kennelly

Call to Worship (MGK)

### **Be still, for the presence of the Lord**

Prayers (MGK)

Lord's Prayer (ALL muted)

Reading: John 18:1-27 (Hugh and Pam Brenton)

### **I, the Lord of sea and sky**

Talk – 'Betrayal and Denial' (MGK)

### **Here is love, vast as the ocean**

Communion

Prayers of Intercession (Margaret Jackson)

### **Love divine**

Blessing (muted)

Do you have a special friend whom you can call on to listen when you have a need to talk? Somebody whom you know will not mind being contacted at a moment's notice: somebody whom you can trust not to let out your secret concerns? A friend like that is invaluable, especially in these current times when our contacts are limited. It may be that person is within the church family, and it is a blessing that members of our fellowship are able to keep contact and share worship by the modern technology of zoom. We know that as followers of Jesus we have a special bond, not only with one another, but with him. "What a friend we have in Jesus", we used to sing.

Jesus, too, had a need for friendship. Many people followed him as his disciples and as he got to know them, from their number he selected 12 men (they were undoubtedly men in the culture of the time, although there were women among his followers). We know the stories of their calling: some were fishermen, like Peter, working class folk; one was a tax-collector, a member of a despised community who were felt to be betraying their people by working for the authorities (and taking a substantial cut from the revenues for themselves): Judas Iscariot was from Kerioth, out of the immediate area and probably an educated person because he handled the groups finances: and one, another Simon, was a member of the terrorist group, the Zealots, who were determined to overthrow the Roman overlords. But all were pledged to follow and serve, and Jesus surely had no reason to doubt their loyalty and integrity. But only time would tell how they would live up to their calling.

We come today to the fifth of our series of talks from St. John's Gospel. We have shared with Jesus and his disciples as they broke bread and learned the lesson of humility in service; we have experienced their concern when they learnt that their Lord would be leaving them; we have shared the guidance that Jesus gave them about coping when he had been taken from them; we have listened to his tremendous prayer for them. Suddenly, the mood has changed. We are plunged into the drama of Betrayal and Denial. This is a time of action. Jesus and his disciples (minus Judas Iscariot) have left the Upper Room and crossed the Kidron Valley on their way to the Mount of Olives where they will meet in the peace and quiet of the Garden of Gethsemane. It is likely that one of Jesus' supporters had given him access to his own private garden and it is here, where they had met at times before, that the drama will play out. In 1996 a group from Park Road went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, led by Revd George Balmer. This included a visit to the site of the Garden of Gethsemane. I remember how peaceful it seemed, filled with old, gnarled olive trees, and while we were there we read from scripture to recapture the events from Jesus'

time. Here, though, in our story, we encounter potential violence: an armed group determined to hunt down Jesus of Nazareth, a man of peace. Perhaps the authorities were uncertain how many folk Jesus might have with him, and they did not want to give him the chance to escape. So Judas, the temple guard and a band of Roman soldiers to ensure that things did not get out of control, are lined up against Jesus – and Jesus dominates the scene. He is the still centre in an alien world.

Here we see the courage of Jesus. At Passover time it would have been full moon and bright. No doubt the guard thought they would have to search for Jesus, so they bring torches, but he steps out, faces them, questions them and identifies himself. He is unarmed, but power and authority radiate from him and they draw back, some falling to the ground. Jesus had the power to escape if he wanted to, but he chose to show his full obedience to his Father God and accept that he must die that others might live. He shows his concern for his disciples. 'I am he whom you want,' he said. Take me and let these others go.' He restrains Peter, who himself showed courage in trying to defend Jesus and in so doing wounds a servant of the High Priest. (But I do wonder where Peter got his sword.) Then Jesus is taken to the Jewish authorities.

Judas Iscariot is a puzzle. I have never subscribed to the belief that Judas was destined to betray Jesus – that his involvement was an unalterable part of God's plan. I offer a possible explanation for which I am indebted to Dorothy L. Sayers, the detective novelist and playwright (whose father was Rector of Bluntisham when she was a child and later moved to Christchurch, Cambridgeshire - a fen girl). She wrote a series of twelve plays under the title 'The Man Born to be King' which was broadcast by the BBC during the years of WWII. I remember listening to them and have them in book form. She portrays Judas as a loyal follower of Jesus who became convinced that his Master was being persuaded by the Zealots to lead an uprising against the Roman authorities. Certainly Jesus was the sort of popular figure that people would follow. According to Sayers, it was the Zealot leader who supplied a horse and donkey for Jesus to choose for his entry into Jerusalem: the horse if he would be willing to lead an uprising; the donkey if he was to be a peaceful Messiah. Judas had been bribing the messengers for information by using the group's money. He felt that Jesus was betraying his role as a peaceful Messiah and rather than let this happen, he himself betrayed Jesus to the Jewish leaders who were seeking opportunities to arrest him. In the end, Judas realised that Jesus was incorruptible, and hanged himself in remorse.

Jesus is still the central figure in this mockery of a trial before Annas, the father-in-law of the High Priest. Jewish law forbade a prisoner being asked a question

the answer to which might convict him. Yet this is what happened. Jesus kept his cool, pointing out that there were many people who could be asked about his teaching. Witnesses should be called. As in the Garden of Gethsemane, violence erupted as Jesus was slapped across his face. Realising that he was getting nowhere, Annas sent Jesus, still bound, to Caiaphas, the High Priest. And Jesus, determined to drink of the Father's cup, allows it all to happen.

But what of Peter? He has followed because he is loyal even if he barely understood half of Jesus' teaching. He is cold and tired and the bravery he showed in the Garden of Gethsemane has drained away. He must know that if the guards realised that not only had he been in the Garden but had maimed one of the High Priest's servants, then he too would be on trial. We can quite understand why Peter gives way to fear, panic lies and disloyalty, denying three times any relationship with the Master he had served. Would we have done any better? And when the 'cock crow' came, Peter remembered that Jesus had predicted these three denials. (Regarding the 'cock-crow': William Barclay tells us that the night was divided into four military watches – 6pm to 9pm, 9pm to 12 midnight, 12 midnight to 3am, and 3am to 6am. To mark the changing of the guard there was a trumpet call at 3am. The Latin and Greek words for the 3am trumpet call can also mean *cock-crow*. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant.) There is a further aspect about Peter's involvement that Tom Wright suggests in his commentary. All this happened around a charcoal fire where people were close together for warmth on a cold night. A charcoal fire has its own particular smell (once smelt not forgotten) and for a long time afterwards Peter probably associated this with the shame he must have felt. However, later, by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, there is another charcoal fire which calls up for Jesus and for Peter memories of this sad night. Peter atones and is forgiven.

One other person is mentioned in this story: an un-named disciple who is known to the household of the high-priest and enables Peter to gain entry to the courtyard. Tradition says that this disciple is John. Maybe this is John's way of saying "I was there. What I write is true." But how would John have these connections? Well, John was part of a successful fishing family and the salt fish industry was prominent in the Galilee area. Maybe Zebedee & Sons supplied salted fish to the High Priest's household. John, in that case, would be known as a regular visitor.

Betrayal and Denial. Judas and Peter. Peter's story ends in repentance and restoration: Judas's story ends in judgement. Judas was a high-flyer who plumbed the depths. Peter was a plodder who rose to the heights. But what of us? Where do we fit into this narrative because we, too are his followers? In the song before the sermon we sang, 'Is it I, Lord?' Are we asking if we are the

one whom the Lord has chosen to serve him – and do we respond positively? Or are we wondering whether we are the ones who might betray or deny him? Time will tell. We don't always fulfil what Jesus sees in us when we respond to his call. We may be late developers. Or we may fall behind. Jesus sees in us the potential: it is up to us to let that potential be fulfilled. Yet how often do we fail to bring Jesus into our conversations? How often do we stand aside when we should input our faith into a situation? Or maybe we are tempted to take matters into our own hands, to force the issue, as Peter - and Judas - did.

The tremendous thing about Jesus is that beneath all our failures he sees the real person. He understands. He loves us in spite of what we do, because he loves us not for the things we are, but for the things we have in us to be. The forgiving love of Jesus is so great that he sees our real personality; not in our faithlessness, but in our loyalty; not in our defeat by sin, but in our reaching after goodness, even when we are defeated. So, as we shall sing in a moment:

“Let me, all your love accepting, love you ever, all my days;  
Let me seek your kingdom only, and my life be to your praise.” Amen