

Christ Church West Wimbledon

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Sermon 3 April 2022

Judas and Perfumed Oil

John 12:1-8, Philippians 3:4-14

Today is the fifth and last Sunday in Lent – next week is Palm Sunday when we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. But we are already at the beginning of Passiontide, the season for remembering – even more than we usually do - the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, and its implications.

Jesus had already been thinking of what was coming next, and how to prepare Himself and His disciples for what was to come.

Today's Gospel is set the night before Jesus entered Jerusalem. Our reading comes from St John's Gospel, but both Matthew and Mark also tell the story of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany in very similar terms. Bethany is about six hours walk from Jerusalem, a handy stopping place for someone on a journey to that City. Like so much of the Passion, this dinner is full of a complex mixture of emotions. Jesus never rejected love or generosity, and recognised Mary's offering as a beautiful thing she had done for Him – a word that in the Greek original denotes ethical purity as well as physical beauty. But Judas, and maybe other disciples, were appalled at the waste and had a real go at Mary. Matthew and Mark's Gospels agree that it was immediately after this that Judas went to the chief priests to arrange for his betrayal of Jesus.

So who was Judas, and what made him act so badly?

We don't know a lot about him – not even when he was called to follow Jesus, or why he came. Theologians differ about his second name. "Iscaiot" is sometimes taken to indicate that he came from a family associated with the Sicarii, a radical Jewish sect, who would certainly have supported an armed uprising. Or it could come from a translation of the Hebrew word for "memories" so that his full name would stand for "memories of the Jewish people". Either of these interpretations might indicate that Judas was

disillusioned, because he had been hoping for the emergence of Jesus as a kingly messiah, who would lead His people into glorious victory over Rome.

Alternatively it has been suggested that it means “a man from Kerioth” which is a town in the South of the Holy Land while most of the disciples came from Galilee in the North. So maybe he felt like an outsider in this group of Northerners, and consequently built up a weight of bitterness. But on the other hand, John notes that Judas kept the common purse – that is looked after their money. That’s not really a position which would indicate an unimportant role among the twelve. Judas is consistently put last in the listings of the twelve disciples which are contained in the first three Gospels, but that is unlikely to indicate his position among the twelve at the time. The Gospels were all written some time after Jesus’ death, from the oral record, and the Gospel writers might well have put him last, just because they then knew that he was the betrayer.

In any case, he soon came to regret his betrayal bitterly, and died very soon after Jesus, either by hanging himself (as related in Matthew’s Gospel) or by “bursting asunder” (as related in the Acts of the Apostles).

So what we are left with is not at all clear, as to who Judas was, or why he betrayed Jesus. What is clear is that Jesus died because of human sin and betrayal. The crowd baying for the saving of Barabbas – a known robber and terrorist – surely deserve blame too. And the priests, who condemned Jesus to death, rather than having the courage to debate His interpretation of the scriptures.

We weren’t there to join in with the condemnation of Jesus, but that should not make us complaisant. We also betray Jesus’ love, by our own inability to accept His sacrifice for what it was.

So, what to do about it? All we can do, is to take the message of our Lord Jesus Christ as absolutely seriously as we can, doing all we can to expiate our own sins and those of our forebears of the first century. We have to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our minds and with all our strength, and our neighbours as ourselves. Everything in each of the Gospels confirms this as the truth taught to us by Jesus, in His word and in His actions.

Note added after delivery: As St Paul told the Philippians, in our Epistle, although we cannot claim righteousness on our own account, we can be allowed it through faith in Christ. By holding on to that faith, we press on

towards the goal, for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ. This is certainly a major part of what we can do.

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