

Today is Good Friday and my thoughts turn toward the account of tragic human suffering, perhaps the most tragic ever, not Jesus on the cross but Judas Iscariot. His name will always be a synonym for betrayal and treachery. There are other names we might remember; John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, James Earl Ray, and we might include Jack Ruby for the chaos and trauma he added to the Kennedy assassination. But there are two things that are different about Judas, first, the person whom he betrayed and second, possibly more important, he is the only one among those who I have named who saw the error of his ways.

According to Matthew 27, when Judas found out Jesus had been condemned he was filled with remorse, tried to return the thirty pieces of silver to the high priest, cried out "I have sinned I have betrayed innocent blood". After a less than pastoral remark from the high priest, Judas threw down the money, went out and hanged himself, went out and hanged himself. His remorse was so intense that it drove him to suicide! Given his reaction to the results of what he had done, I wonder why he ever offered to betray Jesus in the first place, and it was he who made the offer. There must have been more to it than a quick, easy way to make some money. Could it have been something that was predestined? I can't believe That God would be so cruel as to force any son into an action that would subject them to such an avalanche of guilt. He went out and hanged himself! All this happened when Judas found out that Jesus had been condemned. That outcome had to be totally different than Judas expected!

But what did Judas expect from his betrayal? We will never know that for sure. But a vague general possibility makes some sense to me. He may have thought that all he needed to do was to get Jesus and the high priest into some kind of dialogue situation, with himself as moderator, and Jesus' articulation of his bonafides as messiah would win the high priest over or, Jesus would do some miraculous deed reflexively in self-defense and the high priest would be persuaded of his messiahship. This is of course purely theoretical.

Nothing succeeds like success and if plans like this had turned out as Judas might have expected. We might now think of him as some sort of hero or saint. Instead Judas is despised, totally excommunicated. At the Last Supper, Jesus said that his betrayer would be better off if he had never been born, and in Acts 1 we have the account of the eleven remaining apostles selecting a successor for Judas.

Many years ago when I was at the Cathedral in Sacramento the Dean, Howard Perry, invited me to join him in teaching an adult confirmation class. One night the subject of Judas came up. Dean Perry said that both Simon Peter and Judas had betrayed

Jesus, each in his own way. He said that if Judas had been able to bear his guilt for just 72 hours, he would have met the risen Christ and experienced forgiveness.

Is there anything we can learn from the example of Judas? Because his motives are so unclear to us, it is hard to say. We do know that he was the group's treasurer and it is said that he embezzled funds from time to time, so his overall honesty is questionable. And all the Gospels are specific in saying that it was Judas who made the initial approach to the high priest to betray Jesus, rather than the other way around. But the contrast between this and the remorse he suffered makes his true motives hard to identify.

We do know that Jesus' reputation had preceded him from Galilee, he had recently raised Lazarus from the dead, had entered the city in triumph, cleansed the temple and all of this raised Messianic expectations even higher than normal for this major religious festival. The high priest saw the situation as almost incendiary. How could they apprehend this man? Would he start a riot? If so would the Romans involve themselves?

We know that Judas saw fit to involve himself in this situation, but why? We don't know but perhaps he simply thought of himself more highly than he ought to think. It was probably sheer arrogance for him to think that he could involve himself in this situation with the high powered political and religious officials, and gain the personal control needed to achieve the kind of outcome he may have sought.

Arrogance. I can't help comparing Judas to Jack Ruby - impulsive, hungry for excitement, hot headed, a bit of a crook. His only contribution to human history was to add pain and confusion to an already traumatic situation.

Perhaps we should take a few minutes to contemplate arrogance. It is a combination of ignorance and pride "thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think" to borrow a phrase from St. Paul. It is very intoxicating. At the time we need caution most we have the least of it, like Judas thinking that he could manipulate people far more knowledgeable and systems far more powerful than himself.

The piranha is a fish at most a foot long found in the Amazon. They have a reputation (probably part legend) of being very formidable in a group. But one alone is not much of a threat despite its sharp teeth. Judas was like a lone piranha trying to deal with a great white shark. His intoxication on arrogance blinded him to the fact that no matter how clever he thought himself to be he was dealing with people way out of his league. So he was used, and achieved the exact opposite of what he probably intended. He drowned in a great black hole of self-loathing.

What was Judas' eternal fate? There is certainly room for pessimism. However, we learned in the Tenebrae service that Bishop Augustine in his "Treatise on the Psalms" wrote these words, "Only the Devil and his angels are shown to us in Holy Scripture as doomed to eternal fire." However, arrogant, misguided and foolish his actions were and whatever evil they caused, Holy Scripture does show us that Judas Iscariot was the ultimate penitent sinner.

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