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Meditation 3: Betrayal

"... When [Jesus] had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas ... [and] Jesus said, 'What you are going to do, do quickly' ... When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of man glorified'." (John 13:26, 27, 31)

I spoke last time of the embarrassing "excess" of love and devotion that a woman showed Jesus as he stood at the threshold of his own Passion; and of how this strange and seemingly random event was used by Jesus to begin to lead us into the way of ecstatic divine love that only his Passion will fully reveal. For the love that was commended by Jesus in this woman was already a love beyond worldly gift-exchange, a love beyond the ordered negotiation of rational give-and-take. And that is why, try as we may, we still find it so difficult to grasp what this unique and shattering sort of divine intimacy and grace might imply - so hard to be ushered into the Passion in the wake of a wild woman in distress.

But now we confront a different sort of distress, and stand alongside the most problematic male character in the Passion story, Judas, who - in contrast to the excesses of a wild woman, and like so many of us still - seemingly could not believe in an economy of Passion and glory beyond the economy of exchange and order. Indeed, perhaps the most revealing thing that the gospel of John has already told us of Judas is that it was he, the keeper of the purse, who was the most truly affronted at a woman's excessive show of love and grief, her "wasting"

of 300 denarii's worth of precious nard. What a terrible irony, then, but how consistent, too, that according to another strand of the gospel tradition, it was for 30 pieces of silver that Judas himself betrayed his Lord. Judas kept his eyes on the balancing books, it seems. He knew what was "worth" what, and how things should be ordered. Perhaps he even wanted to "order" Jesus's victory in some supernatural way, by arranging a splendid denouement with the High Priestly party in which Jesus would be overtly established as Messiah? I suspect so, but we can only guess.

Yet there is more to Judas than initially meets the eye - more indeed than the layers of opprobrium and negative projection that successively pile up within the New Testament itself, and even within our own text from the gospel of John. We see these layers build: Judas is not just the purse-keeper, according to John, but also the money-grubber, the thief, the one whom Satan entered into, and - finally elsewhere, in the book of Acts - the almost pathetic pantomime figure whose guts burst open as he "fell headlong" in his tainted field of blood. In that last strand of tradition, he is satisfyingly humiliated as well as exposed - rather like the great heresiarch Arius, three centuries later, who - to the delight of his "orthodox" enemies - met his end in the public lavatory. So much for them: the two of them, Judas and Arius, appear together in medieval manuscript illustrations along with Satan, safely trodden down under Christ's feet. But none the of these strands of accumulating negative projection about Judas, least of all that last one from the book of Acts, seems able to capture the full subtlety and strangeness of what the writer of John's gospel underlyingly has to say about him. None of them expresses the idea of a necessary betrayal, one that God not only allows but makes a central part of His plan, even as Satan also gets the better of Judas. And here I must protest at, even though I am also obedient to, the church's long tradition of carving a disjunction between our consideration of Judas today, and the leaving of the matter of Jesus's own "excessive" expression of love and communion in the foot washing, for tomorrow. For in John's gospel itself, in this vital thirteenth chapter, betrayal and love are inextricably entangled.

It seems that this terrible paradox of love and betrayal is an intrinsic part of the awful stuff of Passion. Read chapter 13 of John as a whole and you will see that, when Jesus washes his disciples' feet, and sits at table with them to eat his last meal on earth, Judas figures in every paragraph. We might even say Judas is the centre of attention, the focus of this evening. We cannot avoid him. Thus: Judas's feet are washed, along with all the others; he is brought to the table of love and communion, and again marked out for special treatment; Jesus twice predicts his own betrayal, and taking a special morsel of bread (the word is one that, ironically, would later mean a Eucharistic "host"), dips it into the dish and gives it specially, and first, to Judas. And then Jesus quietly instructs him: "Do what you have to do quickly."

What the gospel of John is telling us is that it is Jesus who gives Judas permission, and even orders him, to do the job that he has to do - the Passion cannot happen without him. He is the necessary hinge of it, where life and death, love and betrayal, intermingle and contend. This is indeed Judas's night. So here we meet the heart of the matter, and its most paradoxical twist. Judas, the betrayer, is

central to the plan of salvation. To understand the paradox better, we have to notice that the word used for Judas as "betrayer" (from the verb *paradidomi*) more accurately, or literally, means to "hand over." This verb, rather than the one that more strictly means "betray" (*prodidomi*) is the one invariably used of Judas in the New Testament (except only once and quite exceptionally, in the gospel of Luke). That word play, that little linguistic pun between "hand over" and "betray," therefore, is present every time Judas is mentioned. It is actually "handing over" Jesus that it is Judas's divinely-intended and necessary work to do, even as he also "betrays" him. Jesus, because of Judas, becomes the one who can be "handed over" to his own Passion. And now, in his "handed-over" state, Jesus is, as it were, made "passive" to the world and so manifests his love in a new way, as we shall be remembering in the coming days: only thus does he enter into his "glory." Now he speaks little, whereas before he taught; now he does no miracles, whereas before marvels attended him; now he despairs in the garden, whereas before he triumphed; now he is despised, whereas before he was adulated. Now he dies, whereas before he brought others back to life. Jesus is constrained into a new posture of pure, passive love. All this unfolds as a result of Judas's necessary act of "handing over."

And so, as we ask what this paradox means for us, now, we see that the Judas question cuts deep into the heart of the problem of our own "uncleanness" as we approach the Passion - of our own experiences of betraying as well as of being betrayed. Can betrayal and true (divine) love co-exist? If it was necessary that Jesus be "handed over," if being handed over in this way is of the essence of Jesus's love and passion, then why must Judas suffer for it? Why must he be betrayed as the betrayer, when what he did in "handing over" was what he "had to do" for the sake of the very unfolding of the "glory" of that divine love?

The problem is most poignantly expressed, and also implicitly answered, in another way of representing Judas artistically in the early church which also takes up a final strand of tradition about him in the gospels - the tradition that after the betrayal, Judas, in terrible anguish and remorse, went out and hanged himself. A fifth century artist carves it thus, delicately on the lid of an ivory casket. Two men hang on trees: one is Jesus, stripped on the cross, dying of love; the other is Judas, suspended from his own tree, dying of despair. There is nothing here of the pantomime triumphalism against the defeated traitor, as in the other artistic way of representing him. Instead, this way seems to tell us that suicide, despair of God's mercy, is the tragedy - not betrayal as such. If betrayal is so deep a part of human sin, and so profoundly entangled also with the story of love and salvation, then it cannot actually be betrayal per se that must be repressed or obliterated in the Passion. Rather, what is held up to us is the amazing possibility that even betraying, as well as being betrayed, can become part of the terrible stuff of being "handed over" to the full and deepest meaning of Christian love. God can make love, excessive love, even out of human betrayal. On this view Judas's tragedy was that - unlike Peter - he despaired of that possibility; he could not conceive of that excessive sort of forgiveness. (And indeed, who knows but that God may not have still forgiven him after death? I cannot myself believe that divine love does not extend to the terrible agony of the suicide.)

"And Jesus said, 'What you are going to do, do quickly ... Now is the Son of Man glorified.'" Deep in the heart of John's gospel is a truth that even the earliest church found hard to swallow, lurching between ever-new layers of condemnation of Judas in the New Testament, and then at the other extreme to a weird gnostic adulation of him that occurred much later in the so-called Gospel of Judas, which was designed to sneer at the material Eucharistic sacramentalism of the new "orthodox" church. But surely the truth lies deeper than these two alternatives, as we've begun to glimpse, and as John's gospel intimates. For in the fallen realm of the desire to order and control, the act of "handing over" can strangely coexist with a form of human love, which tragically resists the true vulnerability, and excess of divine love. Yet even this distortion of love, God can weave into His plan, allowing His Son thus to be "handed over," and holding out again and again the offer of forgiveness and grace to the betrayer. The trouble is, we too go on resisting this central truth of Passion: we prefer the strange combination of repeated attempts to control, and its polar opposite, despair.

Here then is Judas, the balancer of the books, the "hander over" of Christ to his Passion, the tragic man of despair. Look on him. For this is Judas's night. And so it is also our night, the night of misplaced desire for control, the night of misguided despair of mercy, which only God's Son can cure and heal. Amen.

Credits: Sarah Coakley is the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University and Canon of Ely Cathedral.