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# See to it Yourself

Matthew 27:3-10

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A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 21, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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I was once involved in a production of twelve plays that portrayed the life of Jesus. All the plays were performed in a parish church. The play in which Jesus was betrayed by Judas took place at 10 o'clock at night on Maundy Thursday. When Judas realized what he'd done, and that the chief priests and the elders had turned their back on him, he started to tremble, and shake his head. He ran out of the church shouting "Unclean...unclean." He ran down the road beside the church, all the way shouting "Unclean...", his distant cries echoing amid the stunned silence of the audience. I'll never forget that moment.

I want to talk tonight about Judas. I want to read his story with you three times – first as a story of one man's personal tragedy; again as a story of each one of us, this evening of Good Friday; and third as a window into the whole work of God.

So let's start with Judas himself. What can he possibly have been thinking? Let's imagine Judas saw himself as a sharper and altogether more significant figure than the journeymen disciples. You can see him as the one always looking to theorize, to analyze, to generalize – reluctant to take Jesus at face value, always looking to see extra interests and maneuverings at work whenever Jesus was healing or teaching. We can picture Judas, slightly to one side of the crowds following Jesus, as if to say, "I have other options, you know; I'm following Jesus because he draws a crowd, but Jesus may not end up being the best way of getting what Israel wants and needs – I'm reserving judgement on that."

And yet Judas loves Jesus. He is moved by the parables, inspired by the walk to Jerusalem, awed by the healings, and can't deny that in Jesus he has truly seen the kingdom of God. He's almost embarrassed by his love for Jesus. In a previous post I was once visited by a senior city official who hadn't been to church for years, but secretly wrote praise songs. He came to my house one morning and left with me a CD of a song he'd just written. He handed it to me for safe keeping as furtively as if he were giving me a brown envelope of pornographic photographs. I imagine Judas like this city official – embarrassed that a man of his intelligence should secretly love Jesus as much as the crowds and the poor and the common people did. Judas can't bring himself to worship Jesus – he always wants Jesus to be a means to some greater end.

And you can sense a mounting frustration as he sees Jesus failing to take his many opportunities to seize power. The defining moment is the anointing at Bethany: Jesus lets the woman's devotion to him be utterly wasted by pouring perfume out in a symbolic act of burial, while Judas sees that such devotion should have been harnessed for a popular movement, such resources should have fed hungry mouths, and a symbolic burial is pious nonsense when there's a resistance movement to organize. Judas betrays Jesus out of impatience at his style of leadership, jealousy at his magnetic personality, and fury that he seems to be making beautiful gestures rather than seizing the initiative. Finally Judas resorts to a clumsy effort at provocation, and, in as many words, says to Jesus, "If you're not going to do what I know is good for you, I'm going to trap you in a position where you have no alternative."

And so Judas leads the chief priests' henchmen to Gethsemane, and kisses Jesus. The kiss is a gesture of self-hatred, if you imagine that Judas resents how much he loves Jesus. Judas is literally trying to turn his love for Jesus into something he regards as more important. He contrives to bring the most powerful forces in Israel together – the chief priests and Jesus. He assumes the priests' pragmatism and the messiah's passion will make an unstoppable combination. But in no time at all he realizes Jesus has been handed over to the Romans, which can only mean certain death, and all Judas has to show from the planning and scheming and devotion and analysis of three years on the road with Jesus, all he has left to bring about the kingdom of God single handed, is thirty pieces of silver. Beside himself, he goes back to the chief priests and says "It wasn't supposed to turn out like this. I was supposed to be the hero." But the priests just laugh, and say, "You thought Jesus could be your tool. Turns out you were ours." Not just his discipleship, but the whole life project of Judas, to manipulate

others to some unspecified greater end, is in tatters. Everything Judas stood for is exposed to himself and others as empty and cruel. It's unbearable. He hangs himself.

We want Judas to be uniquely evil, because then we can know that we couldn't have betrayed Jesus. We want Judas to be a monster because we don't want him to be too much like us. But what we have already discovered is that Judas is all too much like us. Let's tell his story again a second time, in such a way that makes clear why Jesus went to the cross, and how much Judas is like us.

There are many ways in which we put our lives in other people's hands. When you step on an airplane you put your life in the pilot's hands. When you step in a friend's car your life is in your friend's hands. When you lie on the operating table, your life is in the surgeon's hands. When you say to someone "I love you," you're telling them that your life, or at least your heart, is in their hands. Half the time we crave this power and responsibility, half the time we want to live as if we didn't have it. We crave the sense that we can hold someone's life or destiny in our hands – a baby maybe, or a person we adore and desire who finally comes to return our passion, a person in authority perhaps who recognizes us and gives us power. These people make us feel we really matter, matter because we hold their life in our hands and they matter. But then suddenly we discover we don't know what to do with that power. We wanted the big job but we have no idea how to live into it. We wanted the warmth and pride of everyone's attention but we don't know what to do with the spotlight.

Be careful what you hope for. Judas wanted to "make a difference." He craved a life that mattered – a life that affected not just the destiny of Israel but the destiny of all humankind. And... he got one. He had his hands on Jesus' heart. And he didn't know what to do with it. When he got it wrong he went to see the chief priests and asked for another go. And they laughed at him. "That's your problem," they said. So finally he had only one thing left he could control – the nature and timing of his end. He was so set on his life mattering that he decided he alone could determine the meaning of his own death.

And this, I think, is what betrayal means. This is what took Jesus to the cross. It's when we don't believe our lives matter so we go looking for ways to *make* them matter. And we greedily draw other people into our net, one maybe, or several, or possibly a great many. Perhaps we start by simply wanting others to have a good opinion of us. But soon we don't just want their opinions, we want more. We can't cope with our own lives being out of control so we reassure ourselves by controlling other people's lives – emotionally, physically, sexually, professionally, subtly, clumsily, with coercion or manipulation, in public or in private, with charm or by force: and the moment they realize they've just been a pawn in our pathetic attempts to make our own lives secure, the moment they realize our real commitments lie not with them but only with ourselves, the moment they realize how much they had come to put their life in our hands, that's the moment they see us for what we are and use the word "betrayal."

Treason (or spying) is often a betrayal because it shows you care more about yourself and your own ideas than you do about your country and its people. Adultery is often a betrayal because it shows you put more store by an often misguided notion of your own good than you do by your marriage. Breaking confidence is often a betrayal because it shows you don't value what someone else says to you until you can use it to amuse or impress a third party. Judas' kiss is an agonizing betrayal because his intimate gesture masks the fact that he regards friendship with God not as the ultimate privilege but as a mere means to a more important end. He can't imagine friendship with God is everything. And so he loses everything greedily looking for more.

Jesus seemed to have a different approach. He didn't draw others into his power. He gave his life into the hands of others. He loved his disciples, even Judas, and by loving them he gave them power over him. They could betray him, even to the point of death. One of them did. He began his life in human hands, the hands of Mary and Joseph. They had power over him. He'd been giving his life away since the very start. In Gethsemane he was given into the hands of those who were using Israel for their greater purposes. On the cross he literally gave his life away. The cross is the last word on our security systems, on our control-freakery, on our manipulation of others, on our drawing people into our own web of affirmation and gratification and attention-seeking. Jesus doesn't seize the initiative. Quite the opposite. Jesus saves us *by giving his life away*.

Judas can't grasp this. The moment he realizes he's become a pawn in someone else's game he commits suicide. For him, being under the control of people, especially people he now sees are empty, is the ultimate disaster. But for Jesus, life isn't a puppet show. He has no purpose beyond making, maintaining, and restoring relationships. These relationships are not a means to something more important. They're all there is. For ever. Jesus is God becoming our companion and restoring the whole creation's companionship with God, for ever. Period. *There is no other motive.* We aren't pawns on God's chessboard. We are friends God is seeking to make. And the only way to be a friend is to give your life away. Not usually all at one go; but here God fundamentally, comprehensively, definitively *gives his life away*, because he has no other motive in his being other than to make us and all creation his friends for ever.

The result is that God is in our hands, as we recognize each time we receive the bread of Holy Communion. Because God is in our hands, we run the risk of betraying him every day. And we *do* betray God. We *do* treat God as a means to our own more important ends. We *do* make God into an instrument of our pathetic misguided attempts to find our own security by controlling others. *But God never betrays us.* God has fully handed his life over to us. He cannot betray us. It's impossible. It's unimaginable. It's not in his nature. That's what the cross means.

And that brings us finally to Judas as a window into the whole work of God. When Judas returns the chief priests their thirty pieces of silver, there's a painfully ironic scene when these men who haven't hesitated to shed innocent blood are reluctant to hang onto the blood money. So they buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. "Potter's field." In this phrase we hear two echoes of the prophet Jeremiah. First we remember Jeremiah's field, the one he bought just before the Assyrians invaded Jerusalem (Jeremiah 32). We remember his unbelievable, prophetic gesture that said after a time in Exile the Jews would indeed return to Israel. And we sense that after a time in the exile of the tomb Jesus will indeed return to risen life. And second we remember Jeremiah's potter, the one whose pot was broken in his hands, who then fashioned a new pot from the clay (Jeremiah 18). And we see that the clay of Jesus is about to be broken in our hands, but that God will refashion a risen Jesus out of this same clay. And we step back even further and see that the clay of Israel has been broken in God's hands, and that God refashions a new destiny for Israel out the same clay. That's the story of Israel. That's the story of Jesus. That's the story of the Bible. That's the story of God.

And Judas, the man of all the apostles whose name bears the name of the nation, Judah, is at the heart of this story. Judas shows us that the worst possible thing we can do is only made possible because God in Jesus has given his life away to us, because God has placed his life in our hands. And even the worst possible thing we can do can still be drawn back into the story of God. In fact, without the worst possible thing we can do we would never have seen the heart of who God is. It took Judas' betrayal and Jesus' consequent crucifixion for us to see that in Jesus, God really had given his life away. So Judas is a microcosm of the whole gospel. God calls us, trusts us with his heart and life, and even when we betray him, even when we crucify him, even when we are a broken pot or in self-imposed exile, even when we shout "Unclean..." and our plans are in tatters, God finds a way of bringing even our worst betrayal back into his story, of making us part of his saving work, and, in giving away his life, gives life to us with him for ever. That was the good news of the first apostles. That's the good news today.

The chief priests betray the betrayer Judas when they say to him, "See to it yourself." We too betray Jesus. But God never betrays us. God never says to us, "See to it yourself." That's what we learn from Judas' story. That's what we learn from the cross. Whatever it takes, whatever we've done, whatever it costs – God never has and never will say to us, "see to it yourself." It's never just our problem. He always makes it his problem. That's the good news of Good Friday. God will never leave us alone.