

So much of the Gospel reading we have just heard is so familiar to us and yet there is so much to unpack that we could easily still be here looking at it tomorrow morning. However, since this morning's reading was all about Jesus overcoming temptation in the wilderness, I thought it might be worthwhile looking at the actions of Judas this evening and how he failed to overcome his temptations.

It starts with Jesus actually predicting his end. Jesus has been, for a time now, warning his disciples of the bitter path that he must take and yet they seem to be completely unable to understand the finality of the cross. Repeatedly, they have failed to understand – Peter even getting into a verbal argument with Jesus over it on at least one occasion. But here, he is riding on the crest of a wave. He has just arrived in Jerusalem to much pomp and circumstance with the waving of palms and loud shouts of “Hosanna!” - a word which literally means, “Save now.” He has overturned the tables in the Temple courts in an act of open defiance against the Romans and those who conspire with them. It would not be unreasonable to expect that he is about to have his triumph but, once again, he makes it clear that his aim is the Cross.

Caiaphas had been High Priest for a long time – about 12 years (he survived another six after these events – a remarkable feat considering High Priests would normally only last 3 or four years in the role before being shunted out by the Romans). The one thing the Romans would not stand was civil disorder. Let there be any rioting and certainly Caiaphas would lose his position. At the Passover time the atmosphere in Jerusalem was always explosive. The city was packed tight with people – approximately 3 million in all. It is little wonder that Caiaphas sought some stratagem to take Jesus secretly and quietly, for many of the pilgrims were Galileans and to them Jesus was a prophet. It was in fact his plan to leave the whole thing over until after the Passover Feast had ended, and the city was quieter; but Judas was to provide him with a solution to his problem. There can be only three real reasons why Judas betrayed Jesus. All other suggestions are variations of these three.

(i) It may have been because of avarice. According to Matthew and Mark it was immediately after the anointing at Bethany that Judas struck his dreadful bargain; and when John tells his story of that event, he says that Judas made his protest against the anointing because he was a thief and pilfered from the money that was in the box.

(ii) It may have been because of bitter hatred, based on complete disillusionment. It's long been speculated that Judas was a bit of a revolutionary and may well have joined Jesus' group of followers out of a desire to overturn the ruling powers. And yet, when all had appeared to be going in that way, Jesus shatters the whole of Judas' dreams. In his bitter disappointment, Judas' devotion may have turned, first to disillusionment, and then to a hatred which drove him to seek the death of the man from whom he had expected so much. Judas may have hated Jesus because he was not the Christ he wished him to be.

(iii) It may be that Judas never intended Jesus to die. It may be that, as we have seen, he saw in Jesus the divine leader. He may have thought that Jesus was proceeding far too slowly; and he may have wished for nothing else than to force his hand. He may have betrayed Jesus with the intention of compelling him to act. That is in fact the view which best suits all the facts. And that would explain why Judas was shattered into suicide when his plan went wrong.

However we look at it, the tragedy of Judas is that he refused to accept Jesus as he was and tried to make him what he wanted him to be. It is not Jesus who can be changed by us, but we who must be changed by Jesus. We can never use him for our purposes; we must submit to be used for his. The tragedy of Judas is that of a man who thought he knew better than God.

Having agreed to the betrayal, Judas needs to find the opportune time to enact it. This brings us to the Last Supper. There are times in these last scenes of the gospel story when Jesus and Judas seem to be in a world of their own. One thing is certain--Judas must have gone about his grim business with complete secrecy. He

must have kept his comings and goings completely hidden, for, if the rest of the disciples had known what Judas was doing, he'd have been lynched.

He had concealed his plans from his fellow-disciples but he could not conceal them from Christ. It is always the same; a man can hide his sins from his fellow-men, but he can never hide them from the eyes of Christ who sees the secrets of the heart. Jesus knew, although no other knew, what Judas was about.

And now we can see Jesus' methods with the sinner. He could have used his power to blast Judas in the same way that Captain Kirk uses phasers in Star Trek. He could have stunned him and rendered him helpless. He could even have killed him. That, however, is not Jesus' way. The only weapon that Jesus will ever use is the weapon of love's appeal.

One of the great mysteries of life is the respect that God has for the free will of man. It's especially mysterious when you consider the fact that it is that very free will which started the whole ball rolling and led us down the path of sin in the first place. Without choice, Adam and Eve would not have succumbed to the Fall. Jesus would not have been impelled to die upon the cross. Instead, with the full knowledge that this was likely to happen, God gave us free will and gave our lives meaning. We are not merely cogs in a machine, moving in pre-determined ways but are, instead, autonomous thinking engines of our own. And it is that free will that God appeals to when he is faced with man's sin. God does not coerce; God only appeals.

When Jesus seeks to stop a man from sinning, he does two things.

First, he confronts him with his sin. He tries to make him stop and think what he is doing. He, as it were, says to him, "Look at what you are contemplating doing. Can you really do a thing like that?" Some say that our greatest security against sin lies in our being shocked by it. Time and time again Jesus causes us to pause and look and realize what we are doing, so that we might be shocked into sanity.

Secondly, he confronts him with himself. He bids a man look at him, as if to say, "Can you look at me – in the eyes- and go out to do the thing you propose to do?" Jesus seeks to make a man become aware of the horror of the thing he is about to do, and of the love which yearns to stop him doing it.

Despite both of these strategies, we see the real awfulness of sin in its terrible deliberation. In spite of love's last appeal Judas still went on. Even when he was confronted with his sin and confronted with the face of Christ, he would not turn back. He had made his mind up, for whatever reason, and was determined to give in to the temptation that had been placed before him.

Judas is an easy man to condemn and, with the perfect clarity of hindsight it isn't surprising. But we are not too far away from that because we are prone to similar motivations and actions. Not all sins are the same. There is the sin of the passionate heart, of the man who, on the impulse of the moment, is swept into wrong doing. Though its consequences can be very terrible the sin is not as great as those of the calculated, callous sin of deliberation. The sin which knows precisely what it is doing, which is confronted with the bleak awfulness of the deed and with the love in the eyes of Jesus, and still takes its own way. We hear of instances like this all too often in the media and our hearts are turned to sorrow as a result.

Our hearts revolt against the son or daughter who cold-bloodedly breaks a parent's heart--which is what Judas did to Jesus--and the tragedy is that this is what we ourselves so often do.

During Lent, we have an opportunity to re-examine ourselves and discard those callous sins which we all commit. Faced with the consequences of such sin, can we honestly continue as we have done? Or are we going to repent and begin new lives in the love of Christ?