

starters for Sunday

Holy Week – Monday

Judas

30 March 2015

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Nigel Robb, Presbytery Clerk of St Andrews and former Secretary to the Committee on Church Art and Architecture, for his thoughts on Monday in Holy Week.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

Lord it is I?

[Matthew 26: 20-25](#)

Recently a report came my way. It purported to be the reply sent by a firm of management consultants to Jesus. The company had interviewed the disciples as a result of a request by Jesus regarding their suitability and applicability to the task of discipleship. The report concludes:

It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking the appropriate background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capacity. Only one of the candidates shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness meets people well, has a keen business mind and contacts in high places. He is highly motivated and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right hand man.

As for the others: Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that tends to undermine loyalty. Matthew has been blacklisted by the Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alpheus, and Thaddeus both have definite radical leanings. Those two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee are highly ambitious, and cut throat in their attitude to others and place personal interest and advancement above company loyalty.

A rather mixed bunch to be chosen by Jesus to transform the world!



Lord is it I? There is striking honesty in this recorded response from the disciples when Jesus predicted that one of them would betray him. No pride or lack of self-awareness here. Instead, they possess an honesty that is breath-taking and challenging for us who claim to be the contemporary followers of Jesus. The disciples, with all their faults and failings, knew only too well it was possible for any one of them to be the betrayer of Jesus and all he taught and how he lived. In the evidence we have in the New Testament it seems that, in their own way, most of them were guilty in some way of betrayal, denial, or fear in the light of the events of Holy Week and the trial and condemnation of Jesus.

So why do we focus so much negative attention on Judas? Is it because it makes us more comfortable and able to excuse ourselves? The Christian Church over the years has, probably since the writing of the Gospel narratives, made Judas into a figure easily identified as the betrayer, and one who is despised and rejected. Yet some within the Christian family, perhaps strangely to us, believe that Judas is a saint. They see him as God's agent, forcing the events at the end of Holy Week to happen and the inevitable clash of good and evil to take place.

What did he look like? We know very little about him really, He was a Jew, certainly, identified by the 'Iscariot' meaning as someone who originated from Kerioth. Judas came from a small village south of Jerusalem, from the area where the prophet Amos was born. Judas may have been named after Judas Maccabeus, the most famous leader in Jewish military history. He had no obvious features and characteristics that marked him out in particular

When Leonardo Da Vinci was painting the famous picture of the Last Supper he used the face of a sworn enemy to be that of Judas. He found that no matter how hard he tried he could not complete the painting with that face, so easily identified by his contemporaries as his enemy, in the place of Judas. Eventually he painted it over and drew another face altogether. Too often cheap art has painted Judas as hunched over, eyebrows knitted together, dark hair, dark beard, piercing sinister eyes, and a deceptive face. That is far too obvious; a great artist would paint Judas as handsome as John.

We need to remember that Jesus chose as one of his friends and helpers a man named Judas Iscariot. Judas shared with Jesus the joys and pains known only to the inner circle. He was trusted as the treasurer of the group. He was an apostle. He probably cast out demons like the



others, and healed the sick, preaching the gospel just like any other member of the Twelve. He was with Jesus when the five thousand were fed. He was in the boat when they recognised who Jesus really was and worshipped him. Judas was there when Thomas spoke and urged them to go to Jerusalem to die with Jesus. Judas went. In the critical and intense days in Jerusalem at the Last Supper, Judas was right next to Jesus sharing the feast with him in the place of honour. Then Judas betrayed Jesus and delivered him into the hands of his enemies for thirty pieces of silver.

Judas was not really easily recognised from the beginning as the one who would betray Jesus, and we might be best to recall this when we read the accounts in the Gospel of the disciples. The Gospel writers are all writing with hind sight, knowing clearly that Judas was the one who betrayed Jesus.

Judas perhaps might be more like us than we have admitted. We are all guilty to some extent of projecting on to Jesus what we think a Messiah or Saviour ought to be like. Judas may have been deliberately trying, in his own way, to make Jesus into his own image of the one who was to transform the world.

The story of Judas in the gospels reveals him to be one who actively questioned Jesus' judgment. When the precious ointment was used by Mary to anoint Jesus, he pointed out that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. He makes the suggestion that alternative means ought to be found of acting, and that something so inappropriate and extravagant should be avoided. Perhaps Thomas Hardy was correct when he said that just as the colour of our skin is determined not by the rays of the sun our bodies receive, but by the rays of the sun that the body rejects, so it is among us that we are most often known by those things that we oppose than the things we embrace. We can easily point to the failings of Judas: a censorious attitude, a judgemental manner, and a tendency to criticise those who act in a way beyond his imagination or character and judgment. In this he is very often too like ourselves for comfort.

Somerset Maugham said one time that that the most fundamental and strongest disposition of the human spirit in civilised society is to get the approval of the people around you. Jesus did not seek this – but Judas may have – by going to the religious leaders of his day. In Adam Bede,



by George Eliot, the writer predicts the fall of one of the characters in one sentence, 'The opinion of others formed the very air he breathed.' Judas may have been disappointed in the lack of action of Jesus after the entry into Jerusalem and the fact that the Romans still were in authority and no outright rebellion had occurred. He perhaps longed for a huge religious revolution, ensuring that his faith as a Jew would triumph and the promises of God of protection and love for the people of Israel would be vindicated. Was he trying by the action of collusion with the religious authorities to destroy Jesus, or perhaps, to force the hand of Jesus to become a new Judas Maccabeus or King David?

Each of us is such a tangle of ambiguities, mixed motives, subterranean drives, confused goals and contradictions. Enlarge the scene to include family, community, and national interests and the complexities are overwhelming. The apparent and the real are indistinguishable. Disguises are so carefully constructed that the genuine look suspicious by comparison. We all grade ourselves on the curve through negative comparison with others, but often through the dim light of appearance and deception, and when measuring ourselves on the curve, we all come away with a passing grade.

It is all too simplistic and comfortable for us to side against Judas and not realise that we share many of the same characteristics. We cannot know exactly what was going on in his mind. He may have had higher motives that most might give him credit for. In his action after the arrest and trial of Jesus we see him regretful and tortured by guilt and self-blame. Perhaps he had hoped – like many others – that Jesus would come in power to save his people – as we hear in the story of the travellers to Emmaus after the resurrection – 'we had hoped that...' It is far too easy to dump guilt and suspicion on Judas and turn him into a scapegoat and one who carries all responsibility for the events leading up to the crucifixion.

There were many more who shared in this act. Herod, the political survivor, Pilate, the inept governor who has alienated the people, the High Priest and his family fearing the power of one who did not share their attitudes of self-preservation and protectionism, the crowds, easily swayed by the lack of action and the offer of celebrity, and the disciples alongside Judas, frightened, fearful, in denial, hidden, sleepy and lacking faith.



We are all, like the disciples, if we are honest and self-aware, able to be betrayers, in our own way:

- when we lack the moral courage to stand fast in the face of blackmail and pressure in business when a dodgy deal is proposed;
- we fail to see how our actions and lack of generosity and judgmental attitudes distort and deny the love and inclusive nature of the gospel message;
- we secretly excuse our faults and falling while being quick to condemn others who have publicly slipped and fallen in just the same way;
- our lack of compassion for the outsider, the stranger, the lonely and the isolated, in who Christ comes among us;
- the yawning gaps in our compassion and lack of forgiveness for those who have wronged us and acted inappropriately, whose actions are measured with severity while we confidently expect them not to be applied to ourselves;
- our tendency to small mindedness and exclusive triumphalism;
- our desire for power and prestige, influence and domination, privilege and distinction, putting others down so we may rise higher;
- our comfort with the prevailing culture of narcissism and self – indulgence;
- our persistent deafness to the cries of the hungry, the thirsty and the powerless in the world;
- our preference for a ‘decaffeinated Christianity’ that does not keep us awake at night when we see the world’s woes and our participation in their proliferation;
- a deliberate avoidance of the rigorous and demanding path of discipleship;
- our need to believe that we have 20/20 vision and can see the issues and problems of life and the church with perfect vision and castigate those who do not agree with our version of the truth.

In *East of Eden*, the writer John Steinbeck says: ‘It is easy out of laziness, out of weakness to throw oneself onto the lap of the deity, saying, ‘I could not help it; the way was set’. But think of the glory of the choice. That makes a human a human. A cat has no choice; a bee must make honey’.



Just as Judas had choice, so we have choices, perhaps not as dramatic with such cataclysmic results. Ordinary choices which reflect on our priorities and convictions, and our seriousness of our commitment to the Christian way of discipleship.

We cannot, like the first disciples, say anything other than we are sinners in need of grace and forgiveness and are all guilty of betrayal or acts that are denigrating to the memory and example of Jesus.

Lord is it I?

Of course it is. What we do in response to the offer of grace and forgiveness is the question. Are we ready to take the new start Jesus extends to us this day?

Prayers

Adoration

O Supreme Lord of the Universe

You fill and sustain everything around us

With the touch of your hand, you turned chaos into order, darkness into light.

Unknown energies you hid in the heart of matter.

From you bursts forth the splendour of the sun, and the mild radiance of the moon.

Stars and planets without number you set in ordered movement.

You are the source of the fire's heat and the wind's might, of the water's coolness, and the earth's stability.

Deep and wonderful are the mysteries of your creation.

To you be the praise and the glory, now and forevermore. Amen.

Confession and Petition

God who casts down the pride and presumption of men and women, we invite your blessing on use that we may have the sensitivity to hear and feel your life giving judgments from day to day.

Cast down we pray:

- our premature assumptions, conclusion and commitments;
- the fears of those just starting to learn about life;
- our isolating indifference to one another;



- our pretence of no need for the treasures that are only open to the day application of the discipline of discipleship;
- our obvious and subtle attempts to use you for our purposes;
- our monotonous and nervous self-assurance of success and our dread of simple obedience.

Petition

Lord, God,

In the midst of this varied huddle of humanity, you have set your church.

Give us, the people you have so richly blessed, a commitment to justice and peace for all nations;

and a vision of righteousness and equality for all people in our nation.

Enable us to look beyond our far horizons to see our neighbours in their many guises, so that we may be mutually enriched by our differences.

May our love and compassion for all people on earth be as encompassing and constant as the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen

Intercession

Almighty God

Give vision to our leaders, and deliver our nation from cynicism, alienations, and despair.

May those entrusted with the responsibilities of public office strive to bring peace to our barbaric era of electronic warfare.

May those who labour in the humid stench of the world's ghettos bring nourishment to weary souls and shake up the suave boredom of conventional life which is afraid to follow the convictions of its conscience.

In the years ahead, give us courage and strength to face the sordidness of soul, the shabbiness of mind and the emptiness of heart that we encounter day by day.

In days of discouragement, make us strong.

In time of despair, make us hopeful;

In life's dull monotony, grip us afresh with a renewed awareness of your presence.



Keep us true to our convictions in sunshine and in shadow, in times of stress and the high moments of success, and may we in all our works glorify your name.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen

Prayer

Lord – is it I?

Merciful God,

We are all too aware of when we are alike Judas

Siding with those in authority,

Criticising extravagant gestures of loyalty which we lack the imagination to conceive of

Sitting in judgment of others

Projecting our values and expectations on to Jesus

Wishing to use Jesus in our own power games

Manipulating and being manipulated by those with influence or power,

Failing to choose the path of discipleship

Ignoring the imperatives of love of neighbour

Grasping at ambition and financial security

Open us to the message of love proclaimed by the outstretched arms of the crucified one.

Challenge us to embrace the outsider and the rejected in which we see the face of Jesus

Comfort us with the knowledge that your love is great enough even when we fail to live as we ought to, to give us a second chance.

Charge us with determination to become the disciples you invite us to be, worthy of the identity of followers of Jesus.



Musical Suggestions

CH4 266	God the omnipotent
CH4 484	Great God, your love has called us here
CH4 544	When I needed a neighbour
CH4 533	Will you come and follow me
CH4 399	My song is love unknown



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Revealing Love](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Nigel Robb for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

