

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

BETRAYAL IS NEVER CONVENIENT

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conveniently betray Him."*

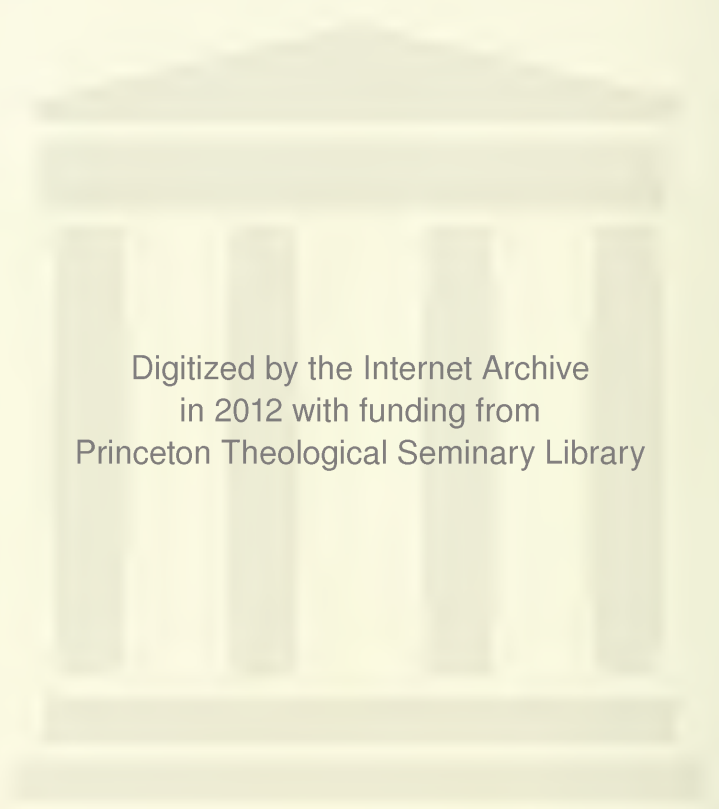
Mark 14:11

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Mark 14:11

In the 11th verse of the 14th Chapter of St. Mark's Gospel, we read these ominous words: "And Judas sought how he might conveniently betray Him." Today is Passion Sunday in the Christian year. A day so designated to encourage us to reflect on the sufferings of our Lord. One of the major perpetrators of Jesus' suffering was Judas Iscariot.

Judas is the renowned villain in the piece. By his traitorous conduct he permanently stained an otherwise noble name. (I have never baptized a child by the name of Judas.) Dante consigned Judas to the lowest of all hells -- a hell of ice and cold. And this because Judas' sin was not born in the heat of passion but out of a cold and calculating rejection of the Son of God.

His deed is made the more repulsive in Mark's gospel where it is set side by side with the story of the woman who annointed Jesus' feet with costly ointment.

* * *

Let us temper our judgment of Judas by noting that providence catapulted him into a major role in history's best known and most enigmatic drama. It was not Judas' lot to remain on the farm untested and unknown. People whose intellect I respect have told me on occasion of the high regard in which they hold Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard." That poem was written as the author looked out over the church burial grounds at Stoke Poges, a site not far from London. It struck him that those people who had lived and died in obscurity were spared being drawn to their full potential -- for either good or evil.

"Their lot forbad: nor circumscrib'd alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;
Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind.

x x x x x

"For from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way."¹

The historian Herbert Butterfield is right in noting that, "In some cases human nature looks better than others because it can go through life without being subjected to the same test."² In American society, with its many devices for absorbing shocks, it is possible for many to go from birth to death without ever discovering whether they are essentially cowardly or heroic.

"One of you will betray me," said Jesus in the upper room. (Mat. 26:21) All were sufficiently in touch with their own weaknesses to ask, each one in turn, "Lord, is it I?" (Mat. 26:22)

* * *

But back to the text: "And Judas sought how he might conveniently betray Him." Judas had already ascertained that there was a market for Jesus. A price had been agreed upon -- 30 pieces of silver, the going price for a slave. It only remained for him to find a "convenient" way to hand Jesus over. That word "convenient" in the Greek is rooted in the word kairos which means "special or opportune time." Judas was looking for the right moment to earn his money and turn Jesus over.

The deed had to be done "off-camera." That is, away from the surging multitudes who had crowded Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. But it had to be done before those crowds would leave following

the passover. Speed was of the essence!

And so his darkened mind hatched the scheme that would be enacted. The site was to be Gethsemane. The time was to be at night. The sign was to be a kiss. AND IT WAS SO. Judas had sought to conveniently betray his Master and he had. The multitudes did not know that anything was going on. No violence had been required. He had earned his bounty.

But Judas' story does not end in Gethsemane. It goes on -- on to overflow in shame and remorse. On to the cry, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." (Mat. 27:4) On to flinging the thirty pieces of silver to the temple floor. On to a self-inflicted hanging and a burial in potter's field.

"Weep not for him who walks unbent
where villainy has bade him;
Weep rather for this penitent,
this Judas who betrayed him."

* * *

Judas had sought the impossible. There is no convenient way or time to dispose of Jesus. When we betray Him we betray ourselves, for He is man as man was meant to be. Not for nothing did He use the title Son of Man. All things betray those who betray Him -- sooner or later.

Jesus is more than a wayside prophet of another day. He cannot be dealt with in a chapter on World Religions and dismissed. He is the light of the world. This is not our claim but His. Jesus is not an "elective" in life, but a required presence, an indispensable truth, a requisite mercy. He is woven into the fabric of history so that in destroying Him we only destroy ourselves.

He did not come to deliver helpful hints on gracious living. He never said, "Please." He came to

save us from our sins and to lift us to our best. Even George Bernard Shaw, never a part of the believing community, was driven to say in Androcles And The Lion, "I am not a Christian any more than Pilate was, yet after an experience of many years, I can see no solution for the world's problem other than that which would have been supplied by Jesus Christ if he had addressed himself to the work of a practical statesman."³

We are not done with Jesus when we lay bare the flaws of the church and burlesque her inadequacies. We are not done with Jesus when we expose the indiscretions of an Elmer Gantry type evangelist, the alcoholism of a parish priest, the frailties of a pastor, the calculating self-interest of an ecclesiastical bureaucrat, or the hypocrisy of those who sit in the pews of a Sunday. He will not go away with that! We are stuck with Jesus! We have Him on our hands! Not for Judas, not for us, is it possible to conveniently betray Him!

* * *

The companion truth must not go unstated: It is never convenient to receive Jesus either. I call to witness here Felix, the Procurator of Judea under the Emperor Claudius. Paul was a prisoner of the empire. Summoned before Felix, he delivered a ringing testimony to the power and adequacy of Christ. Felix' reaction is given to us in these words: "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." (Acts 24:25) Alas, there is no record that Felix or his wife Drusilla who had heard Paul too ever opened their impoverished lives to the riches of the mercy of God.

We never find room for Jesus, we must make room for Him. We never find time for Jesus, we must make time for Him. He will not be fitted in between the cracks of our ambitions. He is not some kind of celestial caboose that can be coupled to the train of

our preoccupations at our pleasure. He will not accommodate himself to our debased values and our counterfeit kind of living. Always He represents change and interruption.

I give Felix credit. At least he knew that he could not have Jesus and his present way of life. He chose to stay with what he had. To the best of our knowledge he never found his "convenient season."

It worries me that we assume our nation to be a Christian nation. I have received much mail from around the country over the last three or four weeks in which citizens take for granted that God and America are in some holy alliance for the saving of the world. We have assimilated Christ. Like Mary and Joseph who took their 12 year old son to the temple and started to return without him, we assume that He is with us when He may not be at all.

To Love Or To Perish is a new book edited by many people including our own Roger Shinn. I was struck by one of its penetrating passages: "How could pockets of starvation exist in America if 100 million Christians really heard Jesus say, 'I was hungry and you fed me?' How could racism continue if 100 million Christians lived the faith of the Jesus who took as the hero of one of his most moving parables a member of a hated ethnic group, a Samaritan. How could people suffer and die of curable diseases if the consciences of 100 million Christians burned with the words of Jesus, 'I was sick and you visited me?' How could opportunities for liberation and reconciliation go by, wasted, if every morning 100 million Christians recalled Jesus' words, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly?'"⁴

At the personal level the point is just as true. Something must go when Jesus moves in. We cannot have Him and keep our cherished hatreds, biases, avarice, lust, selfishness and greed.

It has been suggested that one reason why Judas betrayed his Lord was because Jesus would not commit Himself to the narrow fanatical nationalism that Judas believed in. Judas discovered that he could not have Jesus on his terms. Christ comes into our lives on His terms or not at all.

Many within reach of this message do not intend to stave off Christ forever. Perhaps, like Felix, we have it in the back of our mind that some day when the urgent momentary problems have subsided we will find some room or time for him. In our youth we plead that we must first have our fling. Then that we must first get our education. Then that we must first get a job and make a start. Then that we must raise a family. Then that we must move toward social acceptance and financial security -- and then, and then! It is never convenient to receive him. When He comes it is to repossess us, to shut us down and open us up again under new management. When the new comes, the old must pass away.

"And Judas sought how he might conveniently betray him." Felix trembled and answered, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for thee." Jesus, as the Sunday School youngster put it, "is the part of God we see." In Him we discover the nature of God and discern as nowhere else His claims upon us. Jesus represents the otherness that keeps moving in upon us. He will not be destroyed by us. He will not be assimilated by us. He is there to evoke decision. To induce us to speak our "yes" or "no." Yet, even as He confronts us we sense that it is we who are on trial not Him.

These lines are anonymous but they speak the burden of this message. They are entitled, "Still Thou Art Question."

"We place Thy sacred name upon our brows;
Our cycles from Thy natal day we score:
Yet, spite of all our songs and all our vows,
We thirst and ever thirst to know Thee more.

For Thou art Mystery and Question still;
Even when we see Thee lifted as a sign
Drawing all men unto that hapless hill
With the resistless power of Love Divine.

Still Thou art Question - while rings in our ears
Thine outcry to a world discord-beset:
Have I been with thee all these many years,
O world - dost thou not know Me even yet?"⁵

CLOSING PRAYER

*God, grant that our Savior's passion
may find us warm and open,
sensitive and responsive.*

*Bless us with the gift of a penitent
spirit; that we may rightly
perceive our need and begin
to understand -- just a little --
how great is Thy mercy toward those
who fear Thee. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord.*

Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Gray, Thomas, "Elegy In A Country Church-yard," Poets of the English Language, Vol. 3, p. 541, The Viking Press, New York, 1950.
2. Butterfield, Herbert, Christianity and History, p.62, Fontana Books, 1957.
3. Shaw, George Bernard, Androcles And The Lion, quoted in How To Think of Christ, by William Adams Brown , p. 269, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1945.
4. To Love or to Perish, p. 88, Friendship Press, New York, 1972, Edited by J. Edward Carothers, Margaret Mead, Daniel D. McCracken and Roger L. Shinn.

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