

Palm Sunday

March 28, 2010

## JUDAS!

Judas! We spit out the name with obvious disgust. Guardini calls him, “the man who in the Christian consciousness personifies the most odious of traitors and the blackest of treachery.”<sup>1</sup> There is nary a good thing to say about him. In the naming of the twelve disciples at various places in the Gospels he is always the last to be listed and always with the fulsome description, “Judas Iscariot, *who also betrayed him.*” (e.g. Mt. 10:4). He is called by out Lord “the son of perdition” (Jn. 17:12). A.B. Bruce spoke of him simply as “the false disciple,”<sup>2</sup> and that perhaps is the most damning of all. He is a Benedict Arnold, or rather worse than Benedict Arnold, for he betrayed the Lord of glory, betrayed him with a kiss, and, though he was sorrowful afterwards and threw himself off a cliff, yet he arouses no sympathy.

Today, Palm Sunday, is the day on which our thoughts turn so quickly from the Triumphal Entry and the loud “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” to the betrayal, the farce of a trial, and the rabid cries, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” There were many who played a role in this dramatic turn of events: Pilate, the Governor, whose name is forever associated with the crucifixion in the Apostles’ Creed, not because he was the worst of the lot but to insure that we keep in mind the grounding of the event in real human history; Caiaphas, the High Priest, who conducted the highly prejudiced interrogation before the Sanhedrin; Herod, the King, who was curious at first, hoping to see a wonder-worker, then venomous when Jesus would not cooperate, and allowed his soldiers to mock and abuse him with purple robe and crown of thorns; the fickle crowd; the disciples who fled; Peter who denied; . . . but one was more culpable than any, Judas Iscariot, who turned him over, who for a pitiable sum of money laid the groundwork and opened the way for his arrest, then led the authorities to our Lord’s special place, the Garden of Gethsemane, to which he had repaired to pour out his soul before his heavenly Father, to bind his will to God’s will, and to prepare mind and body to accept the dreaded cup and drink the bitter dregs.

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<sup>1</sup> Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), p. 348.

<sup>2</sup> A.B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve or Passages Out of the Gospels Exhibiting the Twelve Disciples of Jesus under Discipline for the Apostleship*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York & London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, n.d.), p. 368.

Judas, *Judah*, the name of one of the twelve sons of Jacob, of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Judas *Ischriot*. This second name is that of the town from whence he hailed, a town in Judea. He alone of the twelve was not a Galilean. Of him we know little more than that, save that he was called of our Lord, numbered among this chosen twelve, entrusted with the teaching, the authority, and the mission he gave them all. None suspected that he was any different. I think it fair to assume that he didn't either. How he met the Lord and what the circumstance of his call, we know not, but he was obviously quite taken by the Galilean, inspired by his ideals, and, like the others, forsook his livelihood to follow the Master. His ears hung on the Sermon on the Mount, his mind was challenged by the parables, he witnessed the healings, he helped distribute the miraculously multiplied loaves and fishes. One incident alone discloses a difference of mind from the others: Jesus was in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, whom he raised from the dead, when Mary took a costly bottle of nard and poured it over his feet. Judas objected, saying piously that the ointment should have been sold for 300 denarii (He had a keen eye for the value of things!) and the money given to the poor. Saint John, his younger colleague who knew him well and reports the incident, adds, "This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it" (Jn. 12:6). Judas would have preferred that the ointment be sold and the proceeds deposited in his purse.

So, Judas had his faults; which of the twelve did not? Which of us does not? Even our best acts are not free of the taint of self-interest and sin. Abraham Heschel notes, "There is no deed, not a single one, not even the best, of which we dare to say unconditionally: he who does this thereby unconditionally demonstrates love."<sup>3</sup> Surely Saint John would be the first to agree, he who wrote, "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (I Jn. 1:8). Interestingly, Heschel goes on to cite Martin Luther who "is supposed to have said that not once in his life had he prayed entirely undisturbed by any distracting thoughts. In the same way the honest man confesses that never, however often he has willingly and gladly given charity, that never has he done it except in frailty . . . perhaps to save face . . . perhaps seeking alleviation by giving charity . . ."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *A Passion for Truth* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995), p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

So, Judas had his faults. “Let him that is without sin . . . .” And yet, this is somehow different, and we sense it. It is to be noted first that the incident took place yesterday, as it were, the day before the Triumphal Entry, and Jesus, knowing it was only days before the end, justifies Mary as preparing his body for burial (Jn. 12:7). So the context is the crucifixion and the content, an allusion to Judas’ love for money. Papini notes, “Money was pleasing to Judas, pleasing in itself and pleasing in its possibility of power. He spoke of the poor, to whom Jesus had distributed bread in the country-solitudes, as well as to his own companions, too poor as yet to conquer Jerusalem and to found the empire of the Messiah where Judas hoped to be one of the masters. And he was envious as well as grasping; envious as all misers are.”<sup>5</sup>

It was an inordinate desire for money, and it was *money* that was on his mind a few days later when he seized upon a rare opportunity. The antipathy of the chief priests and elders to Jesus had come to a head. They were in crisis mode. They *had* to get rid of Jesus and the opportunity was at hand: the Passover had brought Jesus to Jerusalem, virtually into their clutches. The problem was that the people loved him. How could they arrest Jesus without causing a riot? Judas, who knew Jesus’ secret places and could lead them to him when he was in seclusion away from the crowds, had the solution. So he approached the conspirators saying, (yes!), “What’s it worth to you?” and they struck a deal. Thirty pieces of silver.

Money!!! Papini waxes eloquent on the subject, saying,

Judas is the mysterious victim sacrificed to the curse of money. Money carries with it, together with the filth of the hands which have clutched it and handled it, the inexorable contagion of crime. Among all the unclean things which men have manufactured to defile the earth and to defile themselves, money is perhaps the most unclean. These counters of coined metal which pass and repass every day among hands still soiled with sweat or blood, worn by the rapacious fingers of thieves, of merchants, of misers; this round and viscid sputum of the Mint, desired by all, sought for, stolen, envied, loved more than love and often more than life; these ugly pieces of stamped matter, which the assassin gives to the cut-throat, the usurer to the hungry, the enemy to the traitor, the swindler to his partner, the simonist to the barterer in religious offices, the lustful to the woman bought and sold, these foul vehicles of evil which persuade the son to kill his father, the wife to betray her husband, the brother to defraud his brother, the wicked poor man to stab the wicked rich man, the servant to cheat his master, the highwayman to

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<sup>5</sup> Giovanni Papini, *Life of Christ*, tr. Dorothy Canfield Fisher (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), p. 232.

despoil the traveler; this money, these material emblems of matter, are the most terrifying objects manufactured by man.<sup>6</sup>

Judas, a “victim sacrificed to the curse of money”? Yes, money was part of it, a weakness that gave entrance to the devil to his innermost soul. How diligent we must be against all those vices by which we expose ourselves to mortal danger! And yet, there was more than just money. His reward was a paltry amount. Was it a symbolic tithe on the 300 denarii value of the nard? We know not, but he came quickly to despise the money, throwing it on the floor of the temple. What was it really filthy lucre that motivated him? Raymond Brown, whose two volume opus is a virtually exhaustive treatment of scholarly considerations concerning the death of Jesus, devotes an extensive Appendix of his book to the subject.<sup>7</sup> I think it doubtful that any of us can really grasp the essence of Judas’ act or penetrate its innermost motive. This really is “the heart of darkness.” A.B. Bruce calls it “the incomprehensible mystery of iniquity.”<sup>8</sup> John points us in the right direction when he tells us at the beginning of his treatment of the Last Supper, “During supper, when *the devil* had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him,” Jesus began to illustrate his love for the disciples by washing their feet (Jn. 13:2). Then, later in his treatment of the meal, John tells us that after Jesus gave Judas the sop, “*Satan* entered into him, and Jesus said, ‘What you are going to do, do quickly’” (13:27). John concludes the account by saying, “After receiving the morsel, [Judas] immediately went out; and it was night” (13:30)

This is no ordinary betrayal. Papini again with his customary insight says that after two millennia of puzzling Judas’ terrible deed, it “remains stubbornly incomprehensible. His is the only human mystery that we encounter in the Gospels. We can understand without difficulty the depravity of Herod, the rancor of the Pharisees, the revengeful anger of Annas and Caiaphas, the cowardly laxity of Pilate. But we have no evidence to enable us to understand the abomination of Judas.”<sup>9</sup> The only clue we have is John’s statement, “Then entered Satan into Judas.” The crime of Judas is a crime unlike any other because he whom Judas betrayed is unlike any other and the love and truth against which he sinned is unlike any other. F.W. Krummacher offers,

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), “Appendix IV: Overall View of Judas Iscariot,” vol. II, pp. 1394-1418.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 376.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 281.

“The heathen world has no Judas, and could not produce such a character. Such a monster matures only in the radiant sphere of Christianity. He entered into too close contact with the Saviour not to become either entirely His or wholly Satan’s”<sup>10</sup>

I have said again and again that we need to read Scripture whole, the New Testament in the light of the Old and the Old in the light of the New, for it is all the one revelation of the one God. And the one whom John mentions, as he seeks to explain this event, is that personification of evil that is part of the biblical story from its beginning to its end. He is called Satan, which means ‘the adversary,’ the adversary of God and the adversary of man. He is the one from whom we pray daily in the Lord’s Prayer to be delivered. He is the one who at the beginning brought about the fall of man, wreaking havoc of God’s good creation, and he is the one of whom God promised at the beginning that while the serpent would bite the heel of the seed of the woman, that seed would crush the head of the serpent. The ancient enemy surfaced at the beginning Jesus’ ministry but his direct onslaught in the wilderness was defeated by the Lord. He bided his time until this critical moment when he thought he saw a way to defeat him, to bring about his death. The Church Fathers had some interesting insights into this, but that’s not our concern at the moment. John shows us that the conflict here, the ultimate context of the deed, far transcends the moment. Here is the eternal Word, the revelation of God, of whom John said in his Preface, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it” (Jn. 1:5). But the darkness, the Prince of Darkness, tries none the less, and the ignominy of Judas is that he let that evil one possess his soul, that he allowed himself to become the instrument of Satan. He let himself, I say, because it was a willful act, the power of the evil one does not excuse him. He had to yield him his will as surely as did Adam and Eve. The devil got his foothold, it seems, through his avarice—which is precisely why we cannot allow sin to get its hold on us, but though God’s word and sacrament, and regular penitence, must seek constantly to be set free of its clutches and live in holiness and righteousness all our days.

I bring all this home to us because, while Judas’ is a unique case, the sin to which he succumbed is not unique. A.B. Bruce warns that “it is not desirable that we should think of the traitor as an absolutely unique character, as the solitary perfect incarnation of satanic wickedness. We should rather so think of his crime as that the effect of contemplating it on our

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<sup>10</sup> *The Suffering Saviour: Meditations on the Last Days of Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1958), p. 60.

minds shall make us, like the disciples, ask, Is it I?”<sup>11</sup> Guardini agrees, “No, what came to the surface in all its nakedness in Judas, existed as a possibility all around Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> And it exists as a possibility for us all. The story of Judas is not simply there to tell us how Jesus came to be delivered over to the authorities. It is there as a warning to us, which is why I drew special attention to Bruce’s designation of Judas as simply, “the false disciple.” He was a disciple, genuinely and for a long time, but, as Jesus warned, the seed can fall into the ground and sprout and bring forth good growth only to be finally choked and killed by sin and temptation of various sorts. Judas was of this kind, and it should be duly noted that at the end even his sense of regret did not save him. He was the son of perdition. He ended his life, he ended his own life, without hope.

Note that Jesus did not pray for Judas, “Father, forgive him for he knows not what he does.” He only said, “Get it over with.” Judas did know. He knew full well who Jesus was and acknowledged, “I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.” But the die was cast. It was too late. Regret was possible; repentance no longer was. The Epistle to the Hebrews warns us ominously, and we should heed its warning, “For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted of the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy [if they fall away], since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt” (Heb. 6:4-6).

Saint Paul admonishes us to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). Let us take his words much to heart as we enter with our Lord this most Holy Week. May we never be found “false disciples.”

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Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010. Copyright © 2010.

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<sup>11</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 376.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 352