

Sermon on Sunday 16 May 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Redeeming Judas

Tomorrow marks the 55th anniversary of a now infamous concert that took place in Manchester Free Trade Hall on 17 May 1966. On that particular tour, legendary folk singer Bob Dylan controversially decided to play an electric set rather than his usual acoustic one, which to many of his more diehard fans was an unforgivable betrayal of his folk roots. In response, one frustrated member in the audience vented his fury with what is now the most famous heckle in musical history; one word - 'Judas!'

The name Judas has become a byword for betrayal. Alongside Adolf and Isis, it's the name least likely to be making a comeback in the baby name league tables any time soon.

Judas is traditionally considered beyond redemption; guilty of the one unforgivable crime. Well, this morning, I want to make a case for 'Redeeming Judas'.

I find myself drawn to Judas for a bunch of reasons. I'm fascinated, for instance, by his motivation; why he did what he did. Also, I seriously suspect that Judas was as much a victim in this story as anyone, not least of scapegoating. His is a tragic story where we seem to have conveniently forgotten that actually he repented, tried to make amends for what he'd done. I'm drawn to Judas because I see myself in him; I, too, have done things I regret; hurt and betrayed and manipulated those closest to me.

Most importantly, I want to make a case for redeeming Judas because I point blank refuse to believe that anyone is ever beyond saving.

There's lots of speculation and bad press surround Judas. What's clear is that he was singled out by the Gospel writers as the villain of the piece. Luke, in fact, even goes as far as to insist that Judas was possessed. In this extract of what we now call the Great High Priestly Prayer, John has Jesus declare that all along Judas was doomed to destruction. Why? In order, it seems, to fulfil God's master plan as set out in scripture. If that's true, then that's one particularly ugly side to predestination. Judas, in other words, is an unwitting pawn in a cosmic game of chess; necessary collateral damage. Is that really how God works? Is that really the God we see in Jesus? When Jesus first called Judas from obscurity to discipleship, was it therefore a set-up, a sting? Again, personally, I can't believe that.

Before we think about Judas's motivation in betraying Jesus, it's worth asking why he responded to the call in the first place; why he left everything and followed this itinerant Rabbi.

Was it ego? It was for sure a huge privilege for someone like him to become a disciple of a rabbi. Only the best of the best educated got picked for such an honour.

Was it perhaps greed? The gospel writer John again brands Judas a thief who pickpocketed from the common kitty. Or was it, as some historians believe, that Judas harboured a nationalist agenda with dreams of overturning the Roman occupation, and was therefore placing all this pent-up hope in Jesus of Nazareth? Was Judas hoping for a military solution, a Messiah who would reinstate Jewish sovereignty, put this once-great nation back on the map?

If so, it's easy to see what went wrong. Jesus just wasn't that kind of Messiah. When his big moment came in the temple with the kicking out of the money-changers, that for Judas was the spark for revolution. But instead of a call to arms, Jesus just slipped back into the shadows. Perhaps that was the final straw for Judas. Might his subsequent approach, therefore, to the religious authorities have been his way of forcing Jesus' hand; of whipping up the crowds into armed revolt?

In one of Barbara Brown Taylor's sermons, she suggests another motive.

'Maybe,' she says, 'he just fell out of love with Jesus. That happens sometimes. One day you think someone is wonderful and the next day he says or does something that makes you think twice. He reminds you of the difference between the two of you and you start hating him for that - for the difference - enough to begin thinking of some way to hurt him back'.

In a different sermon she writes, 'I remember being at a retreat once where the leader asked us to think of someone who represented Christ in our lives. When it came to share our answers, one woman stood up and said, 'I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, "Who is it that told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?"'

Could it be that Jesus turned the mirror on Judas one too many times, and Judas didn't like what he saw?

What's clear to me reading the gospels is that Jesus loved Judas, and when he from the cross uttered those unforgettable words, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,' I imagine Judas was centre front in his thoughts.

When Judas woke up to the reality and consequences of his actions, his first act was to return the blood money and save his friend.

But the wheels of that lethal cocktail of state and religion were already in motion. It was too late. He had served his purpose. His religious leaders gave him no way back, and destroyed by guilt, Judas saw no other way than to end his life. In his Blog, the American William G Carter writes this:

'When we make no room for the brokenness of another, we perpetuate the brokenness in ourselves. After Judas betrays Jesus, he is betrayed by the children of God. The people in his day who are most responsible for teaching the love of God are the same people who withhold that love from him. The Unforgiving Church gives him nowhere else to go.'

The Unforgiving Church... an oxymoron surely, and yet too frequently a reality.

We must work for a church where it's OK to fall and fail; a church where first-response is always mercy; a church that gives no oxygen to shame; a church where holiness isn't about moral standards but about each person discovering what it means for them to be Whole, wholly forgiven; wholly free.

Judas could not forgive himself but what if he'd turned up that night where the others were hiding, and instead of a door slammed in his face, he'd been taken in and given space to grieve and repent, what might we be saying about Judas today?

If our religion or our sense of right and wrong forbids us from reaching out to the Judases we know, then we must rethink both. Because I am Judas and you are Judas, and from time to time, we are all Judas.

Some of us will find it impossible to forgive the Judases in our lives. We hold to our right to feeling wronged. Always, however, it is a prison, a hell which holds both us and them.

I'll end with a story many of you will now have heard many times from me, because it's a story I need to hear many times.

A priest friend of mine was leading a discussion with a class of 8-year-olds, and they talked about what happened on that first Good Friday, that first Easter Sunday. And then my friend asked, 'What do you think happened on the day in between; the Saturday'. There was silence for a moment and then one little Muslim boy put his hand up and said, 'I think Jesus went to look for his friend Judas'.



John 17

9 I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. **10** All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. **11** I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of^[b] your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. **12** While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by^[c] that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

Acts 1

15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) **16** and said, "Brothers and sisters,^[d] the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. **17** He was one of our number and shared in our ministry."

21 Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, **22** beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

23 So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. **24** Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen **25** to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to

go where he belongs.” ²⁶ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.