

JUDAS AND PETER

By Jim Seghers

The New Testament provides a sharp contrast between two sinners, Peter and Judas. The failure these two Apostles and their very different response provide us a timeless lesson.

Judas

The Bible doesn't give us many details about Judas. What we are told is often foreboding. St. John gives the first insight into Judas' character in the sixth chapter of his Gospel. After Jesus delivered the startling Bread of Life Discourse (Jn 6:22-59) the focus of the narrative shifted to the disciples. They respond: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it" (Jn 6:60)? Subsequently, St. John reported: "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (Jn 6:66). This is the only instance in the New Testament where disciples turn their backs on Jesus because of a doctrinal issue. When addressing the disciples, Jesus obliquely included Judas: "But there are some of you that do not believe" (Jn 6:64). Then the Beloved Disciples added: "For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that should betray him" (Jn 6:64).

Afterward, the spotlight shifts to the Apostles when Jesus asked: "Will you also go away" (Jn 6:67). Peter responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and *we* [speaking for the twelve] have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:68-69). Jesus' response corrected Peter's "we": "Did I not choose you, the twelve and one of you is a devil" (Jn 6:70)? In case we didn't grasp the implication, St. John editorialized: "He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him" (Jn 6:71).

Judas' unbelief prompts a question. Why didn't he abandon Jesus with the many disciples who "no longer went about with him" (Jn 6:66)? St. John provides the clue in chapter twelve of his Gospel. Six days before the Passover, Mary used a pound "of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair" (Jn 12:3). Judas strenuously objected, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor" (Jn 12:5)? Three hundred denarii was at that time the equivalent of a workingman's yearly wage. To place it in a contemporary context, if the average annual wage in our country is \$30,000, that sum would represent the value of the nard in today's dollars.

The tragedy of Judas' life is he could peg the value of expensive nard, but he didn't know the price of his immortal soul. John revealed Judas' motivation: "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 6:6).

The evidence suggests that Judas remained with Jesus because of his love for money, not because of his love for Jesus. When it became obvious that his relationship with Jesus would not yield the material advantages he sought, Judas looked elsewhere. St. Matthew informs us that it was

after Jesus' anointing at Bethany that Judas conspired to betray Jesus. "Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I deliver him to you?' And they paid him thirty pieces of silver" (Mt 26:14-15). The irony is that the sum of the betrayal constituted a tithe in relationship to the value of the nard!

During the Last Supper Jesus took a morsel and handed it to Judas. After he took the morsel, "Satan entered into him" (Jn 13:27). Is this an allusion to the first sacrilegious Communion? We don't know. St. John simply tells us that after taking the morsel Judas left; "and it was night" (Jn 13:30). The inky darkness of night forms an apt description of Judas' soul.

Sin makes a person a child of Satan. John affirms this when he refers to Judas as the "son of perdition" or the "son of Satan" (Jn 17:12). In sin we abandon the merciful love of the Heavenly Father, who tenderly cares for our every need, who numbers the hairs of our heads, and has prepared for each one an eternal destiny of which "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). In sin we choose instead to become children of Satan, that tyrant who is "a murderer, a liar and the father of liars" (Jn 8:44). One of the intolerable tortures of hell is an eternity spent under Satan's odious, hateful and insufferable presence. That alone is a horror beyond our imagination.

Arriving at the garden of Gethsemane before an armed band Judas greeted Jesus: "Hail, Master" (Mt 26:49)! However, in the agitation of the moment Judas' duplicity was revealed. Only unbelievers addressed Jesus as "Master" or "Teacher" in Matthew's Gospel. Believers always addressed Jesus as "Lord." Then the traitor feigned great love for Jesus, for the word St. Matthew used for "kiss" means "to kiss much." This showering of kisses accentuated Judas' evil motive, which was to finger Jesus to the mob that followed him.

Ignoring the profound feelings of hurt and betrayal, Jesus mercifully reached out to Judas with an invitation to faith and repentance. He called Judas "friend" (Mt 26:50). He used his personal name, "Judas," (Lk 22:48) in order to enkindle their former familiarity. He also unmasked his evil design hidden under the semblance of a kiss of peace and love: "would you betray the Son of man with a kiss" (Lk 22:48)? Finally, Jesus challenged Judas to examine himself: "Behold, why are you here?" (Mt 26:50), in other words, consider the foulness of your deed and the precarious state of your soul.

Even at this moment had Judas repented; his apostleship would have been restored. He would have become a great saint and a martyr - a perpetual example of God's infinite mercy. Instead, Judas rejected the grace of forgiveness. Ultimately, when the full realization of his awful deed crashed upon him, Judas confessed to his hardhearted conspirators who showed him no compassion. Confronted with their contemptuous rejection, Judas foolishly considered his sinfulness bigger than God's mercy. Having already killed the life of grace in his soul, it was a short step to murdering his body. "He went and hanged himself" (Mt 27:5) and "he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out" (Acts 1:18). Judas miserable end paints a graphic picture of the consequences of unrepented sin. The tragedy of Judas' life was not his lack of

faith, his greed, or even his betrayal. His folly was his refusal to respond to the heart of Jesus, Love and Mercy Incarnate.

Peter

The New Testament has quite a lot to say about Peter. He is named 191 times, which is more than all the other Apostles collectively. Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter from the Greek word *petros* – rock, when he promised to make him his prime minister, the human head of his Church (Mt: 16:18-19). Peter, alone, acts as the spokesman for the Apostles (cf. Mt 19:27; Mk 8:29; Lk 12:41; Jn 6:69).

We can see in Peter flaws that are characteristic of our culture, perhaps even of ourselves. Peter was a man of action, who neglected prayer. He loved the Lord, but he trusted Peter. When the ambitious Apostles were arguing which of them was the greatest (Lk 22:24), Jesus gave them a double lesson. He taught them they were called to a vocation of service not self-glorification (Lk 22:25-30). Then, directing his remarks to Peter, he warned all the Apostles about the trial they would soon be facing. “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to have you [plural], that he might sift you [plural] like wheat, but I have prayed for you [singular] that your [singular] faith may not fail; and when you [singular] have turned again [converted], strengthen your brethren” (Lk 22:31-32). The expression “sift you like wheat” is borrowed from the book of Job (Job 1:6-12). It means to be severely tempted.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus began his final confrontation with Satan with prayer, as he does before all his important acts. Humanly speaking he, too, is in need of the Father’s strength. All disciples need that same preparation. “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Lk 22:40). This admonition certainly applies to us today, just as it did to Peter and the Apostles. As he did at the time of his transfiguration Jesus calls the same three witnesses, Peter, and the brothers James and John, to observe his agony. Later they would understand that the power and glory that was manifested in Jesus’ transfiguration would save the world, but only through the terrible suffering and humiliations that began in Gethsemane and ended on Calvary.

Even during this great trial, Jesus thinks of others. He tells his Apostles “remain here and watch” (Mk 14:34). They, too, will undergo an agony in miniature. St. Luke tells us the Apostles were sleeping in sorrow (Lk 22:45). Their sadness is evidenced during Jesus’ farewell discourse. Jesus had told them that one of them would betray him; Peter would deny him; that they would desert him; that he would go away from them; and that there would follow a period of great tribulation before they would be again with him in a permanent union. They wished to be strong, but their natural strength was not strong enough to resist the weariness of their emotions.

Because they relied on themselves the Apostles were in a state of confusion each time Jesus returned to exhort them to watch and pray. St. Mark declared, “they did not know what to answer him” (Mk 14:40). Would that they would have cried out in their weakness as they did

once before, “Lord save us” (Mt 8:25)! The sleeping Apostles form an apt picture of human frailty. Jesus warned Peter: “The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mk 14:38).

Peter declared himself ready to go to prison and to death with Jesus . . . in the comfort of the upper room. But on the field of combat he was unable to watch one hour with him. Such is the reliability of self-confidence! The events of Calvary will indelibly impress this lesson upon each of them. Years later, after they have learned to trust only in Jesus, they will suffer imprisonment and death. Peter will ask to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy to suffer like his Lord.

When Jesus came upon his sleeping Apostles for the third time he said, “sleep on now, and take your rest.” The time for prayer and watching with its grace was past. They had failed! In yielding to human nature they missed their opportunity. It could not be made up. There was no need for further exhortations. The time of strengthening was past. “It is enough.” Their trial was now at hand. They will scatter, but Christ’s mercy will follow and reunite them.

In confronting the hostile mob that followed Judas, Jesus exemplified how total submission to the Father empowers one to put others first - even in the most difficult of circumstances. He gives this lesson to the Apostles by protecting them, but not himself, “so, if you seek me, let these go” (Jn 18:8). Their danger is primarily spiritual. They were not yet the stuff from which martyrs are made.

Peter’s impetuous temperament now propels him to violent action. He struck a blow with his sword at the head of one of those seizing Jesus. John tells us his name is Malchus (Jn 19:10). Well-intentioned actions that flow from human motives are ineffective. Peter only succeeded in cutting off Malchus’ ear (Lk 22:50), which Jesus miraculously healed (Lk 22:51). In restoring the servant’s ear Jesus insured that no legitimate charge could be brought either against himself or his Apostles. Jesus will conquer his enemies, but not with a sword or even with “twelve legions of angels” (Mt 26:53), but by his ignominious death on a cross. At this point the Apostles flee. Only Peter and John (Jn 18:15; cf. Jn 10:2-4) follow . . . at a distance. They loved Jesus, but lacked the courage to share his fate.

After Annas’ interrogation, Jesus is brought to Caiaphas. Only St. Luke informs us that Jesus turned and looked at Peter after Peter had denied Jesus for the third time (Lk 22:61). Then “Peter went out and wept bitterly” (Lk 22:62). Seeing the hurt, compassionate face of Jesus reaching out to him brought home to Peter the crashing realization of his betrayal, the evil of sin and the folly of self-confidence. There is a tradition that the memory of his denials led to such a profound sorrow and that Peter developed erosion lines in his face from his profuse weeping. Unlike Judas, Peter turned his shattered heart to Mercy Incarnate.

A profound change in Peter is observed in his encounter with Jesus after the Resurrection. “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love [the Greek verb *agapao* indicating perfect love] me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes,

Lord; you know that I love you.’ [Peter used the verb *phileo* indicating brotherly love, but not perfect love. He was no longer boastfully self-confident.] He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love [*agapao*] me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love [*phileo*] you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him a third time, ‘Simon, son of John do you love [*phileo*, meaning can you even claim minimal authentic love?] me?’ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love [*phileo*] me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that [at least] I love [*phileo* with minimal love] you.’ Jesus said to him ‘Feed my sheep.’”

Jesus reached out to both his fallen Apostles. Only Peter responded with true contrition. “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Ps 51:12). No one accidentally trips into hell; we must consciously pull ourselves away from Jesus’ waiting arms.

© 2008