

Reading and Reflection for Wednesday in Holy Week

Matthew 26.14-16

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

Reflection

For thirty pieces of silver, Judas betrayed Jesus to the high priests. The question that I have for reflection today is this: Was it worth it?

For Judas Iscariot, the answer is tragically simple. No. The deal was not worth it. Thirty silver coins would have represented a substantial sum of money, but it is still a poor price to receive for one's own soul. Judas finds himself unable to live with the remorse that he feels for this act of betrayal and takes his own life. No, for Judas, it was not worth it.

But what about for the high priests who paid the money? For them, was it worth it? You may well think that, to get rid of a persistent thorn in their side and threat to their power, thirty silver coins is a small price to pay. But what did they actually get for their money? What, actually, did Judas betray?

And that question is worth asking because a peculiar feature of the story of Holy Week is that the role of Judas scarcely seems necessary. The events of Palm Sunday – Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his disruptive actions in the Temple – would have given the authorities ample cause and opportunity to arrest him. If there was some vital piece of information or evidence that Judas sold to the religious leaders in exchange for those thirty coins, then it is not at all clear what that was. It was hardly worth paying such a large sum just to find out where Jesus happened to be on that evening of the Passover, when he was regularly out and about in the city, easy to find. If Judas had not betrayed Jesus, then it may have affected the timing of his trial and crucifixion, but I doubt if it would have changed the ultimate outcome.

So why is Judas attributed such a central role in the passion narrative? Why has his name become a byword for treachery and wickedness? I wonder if it has something to do with our human need for a villain, someone we can blame for our misfortunes. Easier, perhaps, for his fellow disciples to project their grief and guilt and anger at the death of Jesus onto Judas than to accept their own share of responsibility.

The Old Testament tells of an ancient ritual, whereby the sins of the people are pictured as being laid upon an animal, which is then sent out into the wilderness, to be killed by predators or to die of thirst or starvation. It is from this animal, onto which the people's sins are projected, that we get the word 'scapegoat'. To modern minds it seems a strange and brutal custom. Surely, we don't do anything like that? Except, of course, we do. Scapegoating continues as a way of trying to deal with (or deny) our own faults and failings. We are forever looking for someone to blame.

So is Judas a scapegoat? Well, perhaps. The Gospel writers certainly magnify his role in these crucial events. The early church seems to have needed someone to name as the villain of the piece. But as the story of Holy Week continues, we come to discover the one who is the true and effective scapegoat. Jesus, betrayed by Judas and crucified under Pontius Pilate, is the one who bears in his own body the sins of the whole world and deals with them, once and for all. He pays the price, one that is far greater than thirty pieces of silver, and he does it willingly because he deems that we are worth it.