

LENT MID-WEEK 8

Text: Matthew 27:3-5 & Luke 23:32-43

April 2 2021 Judas and the Penitent Thief on the Cross

Today, we come to the final stop in our Lenten journey
as we gather at
the foot of the cross.

Throughout this journey, we have been looking at the people who were intricately involved in the events that led up to the crucifixion of our Lord: Peter...Caiaphas...Herod...Pilate...and Mary and John.

As we looked at their lives,
we have seen that we bear a remarkable resemblance to them
in the ways we respond to Christ and the kingdom he proclaims.

Today, we are going to look at two faces:

1. the face of Judas Iscariot
the most tragic figure in all of Christian history.

and

2. the face of the Penitent Thief on the cross
one of the most unexpected saints of the Christian faith.

The story of Judas is well known to all of us.

For 30 pieces of silver, he conspired with the chief priests and elders to hand Jesus over at a time and place away from the crowds.

It is a truly sad story, because of all the disciples,
Judas had the most potential to make a really positive contribution to the work of God's Kingdom.

Judas was a bright young man who had
a passion for life...a concern for the poor...a zeal for righteousness ...
and a deep love for Israel.

These are all fine qualities for a man called to be a disciple of Jesus.

And yet, in spite of that, Judas had two fatal flaws—
flaws that would become more evident in the aftermath of his betrayal.

His fatal flaws were
impatience
and self-reliance.

Numerous attempts have been made to understand Judas' motive for betraying Jesus. Some have suggested disappointment was the driving force behind his betrayal.

The thinking is Judas was disappointed that Jesus was not more concrete in linking the Kingdom of God he proclaimed with the territorial Kingdom of Israel—that he was disappointed Jesus was not more militant in his attempt to bring that Kingdom to fruition.

There is good reason to believe that.

Remember, on Palm Sunday as the crowds followed Jesus the whole city of Jerusalem was caught up in Messianic hope.

The people were giving Jesus the red-carpet treatment with the palms shouting, ***Hosanna to the son of David.***
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Judas, no doubt, gets caught up in the frenzy of the moment.

Perhaps he begins to think about the role he will play in Jesus' government. But then things quickly begin to sour.

The very next morning trouble begins brewing when Jesus enters the Temple and stirs up a hornets' nest by driving out the moneychangers from the Temple's outer courtyard.

The moneychangers are doing nothing illegal.

In fact, they provide the goods and services needed by the people to offer the religious sacrifices prescribed by the Law.

Then, as Jesus tells the parable of the Wicked Tenants that points to his death, Judas sees things are heading in a far different direction than what he had imagined just a couple of days before.

Instead of attacking the Romans,

Jesus is attacking the institutions and religious practices of his own people. Could it be that Judas betrayed Jesus because he was disillusioned?

Others have suggested impatience was the motivation—that Judas was trying to force Jesus' hand when he betrayed Jesus.

Judas is impatient and so he tries to force Jesus

to exercise the mighty power he has seen with his own eyes

in the miracles Jesus has performed throughout the course of his ministry.

Jesus has all that power and compassion,

and yet he is making no move to claim the throne, drive out the Romans and bring peace to the people.

Surely a Messiah who could feed the multitudes...still the storm...
 heal the sick...give sight to the blind...cure the lame...cast out demons...
 and even raise the dead...
 can exercise his godly power to seize the throne of Israel...
 drive out their Roman oppressors...
 and bring peace and prosperity to the people.

Whatever his motives were, we shall never know,
 but without a doubt
 Judas' story is
 tragedy personified.

Judassssss.

Even his name sounds despicable,
 like the hiss of a snake flicking its tongue in defiance.

But what is really tragic about Judas is not what he did;
 the ultimate tragedy of his life
 is what he didn't do.

It is not the betrayal of Jesus, as awful as that is.
 It is not the manipulation of trying to force Jesus' hand.
 It is not even the misunderstanding of what Jesus' ministry is about
 The real tragedy that leads to his damnation and our contempt,
 is that once he realizes his mistake
 he cannot bring himself to confess his sin to Jesus.

Listen again to what happens—
 after Judas sees Jesus condemned
 —after he sees his best laid plans disintegrate right before his eyes—
 he repents and brings back the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests.

I have sinned, he says,
by betraying innocent blood.

Judas repents for his sins.
 And no doubt, that is the most earnest confession and repentance
 that has ever been made.

The only problem is, Judas confesses to the wrong man.
 He confesses to Caiaphas
 instead of Jesus.

Being a self-reliant man,
 Judas goes to Caiaphas and tries to work things out himself.
 It always had worked for him in the past, but this time he is in over his head.
 And so, when his confession and effort meet with failure—
 rather than turning to Jesus and seeking his forgiveness,
 Judas takes matters into his hands one last time.

He throws the silver coins to the ground,
 runs out to the nearest tree,
 puts a rope over its strongest limb and hangs himself.

Poor Judas!

If he had only grasped the depth of the love Jesus had for him...
 if he had only stuck it out a little longer.

If he had only drug himself to the cross,
 he would have heard the most profound words of forgiveness ever spoken,
Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

If only he had gone to the cross.
 he would have heard Jesus say:
Judas, I love you and forgive you.

How different was the experience of the Penitent Thief on the Cross.
 According to ancient tradition,
 his name is Dysmas.

As he hangs on the cross next to Jesus, there is no question about his guilt.
 The Roman justice system was swift, but it was also efficient and effective
 in determining one's innocence or guilt.
 And once a verdict had been rendered,
 punishment was
 swift and severe.

The two thieves crucified with Jesus had been caught red-handed,
 and now they were paying the price:
DEATH BY THE CROSS.

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die.
 The suffering was long and unbelievably brutal.
 In fact, that's where we get the word *excruciating*—Latin *from the cross*.

Victims could writhe in pain on the cross for days on end
 as the body seemingly refused
 to give in to the inevitability of death.

When death finally came, it was a blessed release
 for the one crucified
 and for those standing watch at the cross.
 And now these two thieves were beginning that long arduous road of suffering
 as the Roman guards nailed them to their crosses
 and lifted them upright on the hill for all to see.

Immediately, one of the thieves begins to curse his fate and everyone around him:
 the guards...the crowds...
 the Roman court that convicted and sentenced him.
 He curses everyone and everything.
 It's not surprising that he picks up the taunts of the soldiers and bystanders
 and begins to curse Jesus as well.

His taunts make perfect sense—not that this was a time for logic.

***If you are the Messiah,
 save yourself and us!***

But Dysmas sees something powerful in the silence of Jesus,
 especially in the face of the ugly taunts hurled at him
 by those who come to watch the grizzly spectacle.
 This silent and patient suffering broken only by Jesus' words of forgiveness
 for those who taunt him and conspired to do him in
 must have made a deep impression on Dysmas.

He sees the charge against Jesus!
 it is written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek
 and nailed to the cross for all to see:

I.N.R.I.

Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum
Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

Dysmas may not know the details of the case,
 but he is smart enough in the ways of the world to figure out
 this charge is too vague to be anything other than a sham.

Whatever Jesus has done,
 Dysmas knows he doesn't
 deserve to be crucified.

Coming to this realization, he turns his head and tells his partner in crime to shut up.

***We are getting what we deserved,
 but he is being punished unjustly.***

Then, as he thinks about Jesus' silence amid the taunts,
 he begins to put two and two together,
 and, by the grace of God, begins to realize that
 Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen one sent by God,
 and that his suffering and death
 is all a part of God's plan.

In that moment of spiritual awakening, he turns his face to Jesus and says to him,

***Jesus, remember me
 when you come into your kingdom.***

In that moment of new-born faith,
 Dysmas hears the words that promise him
 the eternal blessing of God's love.
 Jesus turns his face to Dysmas and says,
*Truly I tell you,
 today you will be with me in Paradise.*

There is much we can learn as we look at the face of Dysmas.
 As we look at his confession of faith and Jesus' response to him,
 we catch a glimpse of the depth and wonder of God's love for sinners.

The first thing that strikes us about Jesus' words to Dysmas
 is the total acceptance of a man
 who is totally corrupt.

There is nothing redemptive in the character of Dysmas.
 There is nothing good or noble about him—
 nothing that merits God's love and mercy.

Dysmas' admission of guilt is nothing more than the admission
 many have made before they were executed
 for their crimes against society.

But here in the depths of his sin,
 we begin to discover the depth and wonder of God's love
 as Jesus reaches out to him and says, *Today...with me...in Paradise.*

What catches Jesus' attention
 is not Dysmas' admission of guilt for the crimes he has committed;
 it is the plea of his repentant heart for Jesus to have mercy on his soul.

Dysmas knows he deserves death,
 and it is in the
 face of this knowledge
 that he asks Jesus to remember him
 praying that Jesus will give him
 mercy and grace.

The second thing that strikes us about Jesus' words to Dysmas
 is the hope they bring to our lives,
 because, in essence, **we all come to Christ like thieves on a cross.**

That may sound offensive to us
 because none of us are
 hardened criminals.
 Each of us, I believe, sincerely tries to live by the precepts
 of faith and obedience
 to the commandments of God.

Nevertheless, as St. Paul so eloquently states in his letter to the Romans:

All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

There is no exception; sin is a universal disease; it infects all of humanity.

Paul also writes: ***The wages of sin is death.*** Romans 6:23

If we sin, we experience the spiritual death
that unequivocally separates us from God.

When God in his holiness and purity looks at the stain of sin upon our lives,
there is nothing within us

that merits or deserves God's grace and love.

Thus, like the thief, we stand before God as unworthy people
whose lives are broken and shattered
by the burden and weight of our sins.

The only way our lives can be unencumbered and made whole...

the only way our lives can be

put back together...

is by the grace and mercy of God

that comes to us

from the cross.

The wisdom of Dysmas is that he knows he cannot win God's favor
by the merits and deeds of his wretched life.

He knows he is totally dependent on the grace and mercy of Christ.

We are wise too,

when we come to realize

what he comes to know at the time of his death—

that when we are in the presence of Christ,

we are in the presence of God,

and when we are with Christ, we are in Paradise.

There is great hope for us in Jesus' words to Dysmas.

They assure us, as they assured him,

that no matter how wretched and depraved

our lives and our sins may be,

when we turn to Christ in faith and ask for his forgiveness,

he is there with his love and mercy

to give us the gift of life even though we deserve the sentence of death.

How different the responses

of Judas and Dysmas

in their encounters with Christ.

Dysmas dies with a smile on his face.

In the presence of Christ, he has experienced the presence of God.

Being there with Christ, he knows he is in paradise.

Judas dies with a face contorted by anguish and despair.

Instead of going to Jesus, the tree of life,
he hangs himself on the tree of death.

And now we are at the point of our Lenten journey
where we gather around the cross
to see Christ's supreme sacrifice of love.

The events that lead up to the crucifixion
have run their course:

the conspiracy of the priests...

the amusement of Herod...

the indifference of Pilate...

the betrayal of Judas...

the denial by Peter...

the cross is now being lifted before us
bearing the body of Christ, the Lamb of God.

As we complete our journey
and look at the faces of the people around the cross.
we see the depth and mystery of God's love.
As we look at their faces, we see how far God will go,
to forgive us our sins
and give us the gift of life.