

Palm Sunday Reflections

John 18: 1-14

John 18: 15-18; 25B-27

John 18: 33-40

A Reflection on Judas

When we picture Judas Iscariot, what sort of images come up in our minds? A dastardly villain, perhaps? If we could draw him rubbing his hands together, a constant sneer on his face, perhaps even a twirly, pencil-thin mustache...would that sum up what we think of Judas?

Maybe we should picture him like this. Maybe deep down in his core, this is all there was of Judas Iscariot, and so maybe remembering him like this is actually remembering the essence of who he was.

And yet, he was a trusted disciple.

He was trusted enough that he was put in charge of finances for the group. If we're being honest, if you have any misgivings about someone, would you put them in charge of your checkbook? I hardly think you would. I know I wouldn't.

So there is certainly a level of trust involved here.

What about the fact that Jesus called him a friend?

In John 13, Jesus predicts his betrayal to his disciples. He tells them, "He who shared my bread has turned against me."

We should understand that Jesus is quoting Scripture here, as he does quite often. Here, he's quoting Psalm 41:9 that says:

*Even my close friend,
someone I trusted,
one who shared my bread,
has turned against me.*

In Matthew's account of the arrest, even in this tense and treacherous moment, Jesus tells Judas, "Do what you came for, friend."

I don't think Jesus lightly chooses this word, "friend." I believe that Judas was a friend to Jesus, which makes his betrayal all the more bitter.

What can we learn from a character like Judas? Because it appears there's more to him than a conniving villain.

First, I think we can surmise that a Judas isn't just that one person you always felt you had a reason to mistrust. A Judas can be someone you're intimately familiar with, someone you trust, someone you even call friend.

A Judas is someone who doesn't guard against their downfalls. In his case, it was a love of money. In reality, a Judas can be brought on by a love of anything that is not Christ.

The more uncomfortable truth in this is that *we* – you and I – can be Judas. If we fail to guard against our own shortcomings, misgivings, and greed...if our love of worldly things exceeds our love of Christ...we can be Judas, too.

We view Judas as the worst of the worst, and I don't mean to minimize his sin this morning. But the truth is that it's so easy to find ourselves heading down that same road.

But the good news is that Christ died for people like Judas. Even if the indications we have are that Judas didn't receive or seek out that grace, that's not the same story the rest of us have to share.

Be careful of how easy it is to become like Judas. Don't be like Judas. Look to Christ above all in all things. Look to Christ on the cross for your gift of mercy.

A Reflection on Peter

It's important to remember that when Jesus called Peter the rock upon which he will build his church, he already knew from experience that Peter didn't quite live up to that name.

Peter was temperamental. His faith was sometimes found to be lacking. He was quick to speak, often not listening as much as he could have.

Not so long ago, Peter seemed to be getting it. He affirms his belief that Jesus is the real Son of God, the Messiah. And now he's distancing himself from that Messiah.

So when, in the heat of the Passion story, we see that rock showing signs of cracking, we're tempted to think how very typical that is of Peter.

I think we overestimate our ability to stand for Jesus no matter how dangerous a situation we are in. That might not be true for all of us, I'm sure there are plenty of people out there that would not deny Christ no matter what.

What I will say to us today, though, is simple: we have never faced what Peter was facing that night. We have never been in a situation where our simple association with Jesus would mean death.

Because that's what Peter was facing. This wasn't just an upset crowd. This was a bloodthirsty crowd. They chanted for Jesus to be put to death, to be hung on a cross. These people wanted blood. And Peter is in the middle of them.

We haven't been in the middle of something like that, where the very profession of your faith can be your demise. Where there's not a friendly face in sight, and you're surrounded by ravenous, angry people who would be more than happy to turn you in.

Now, just like with Judas, we're not looking to minimize what Peter did. Denying Christ is still denying Christ. But the point here is not that what Peter did wasn't so bad. The point here is that we cannot legitimately say we would do any better than he did.

But again, there is good news. Christ died for people like Peter. And Peter did the opposite of Judas. Peter did search out and receive God's forgiveness and grace.

I hope we never know what it was really like to be Peter on that night. Be careful not to let your pride tell you that you would never do what Peter did.

However, when we do fall to sin, don't deny your gift of grace. Look to Christ on the cross for your gift of mercy.

A Reflection on Barabbas

In some manuscripts, such as Matthew's account of events, Barabbas is identified as Jesus Barabbas. The name Jesus wasn't so uncommon in antiquity, but having two men in this moment named Jesus adds some spiritual weight to these events.

Pilate is essentially asking the crowd which Jesus they want. Do they want the murdering terrorist, the Jesus of the world? Or do they want the teacher, the Messiah, the King of the Jews?

The crowd chooses the Jesus of the world.

It's hard to blame everyone in that crowd. When everyone around you is shouting and enraged, when they are yelling and chanting what they want, it's hard to go against that. There's a group mentality that takes over in that moment, and it's almost hypnotizing to the point where you may start to shout along with them without even thinking about what you're saying.

Doesn't that say a lot about humanity? Doesn't that say a lot about what we choose when push comes to shove?

We need to look even deeper at the name Jesus Barabbas, though. The first part of his name carries enough meaning on its own, but the second part of his name shouldn't be overlooked.

"Barabbas" is actually a mashup of two Aramaic words: *bar* and *abbas*. Translated to English, *bar* is "son" and *abbas* would be "Abba" or "father."

So literally, this man's name is Jesus, "son of a father."

If we go back to the idea that Jesus was a common name, and then his second name is as generic as "son of a father," that would be like us trying to identify someone today when all we know of them is that their first name is John, and they were born to a father.

Thinking of it that way, we could say that Jesus Barabbas could represent anyone. We are, every one of us, children of a father.

And to take this a step further, Jesus Barabbas whose name reminds us of all we choose when we don't choose Jesus Christ, Jesus Barabbas whose name reminds us that he represents us all, is the first person who stands guilty and sentenced to death that Jesus Christ replaces on the cross.

Because Jesus Christ goes to the cross, Barabbas has a chance at life. He has a chance at life in this world, yes, but he also gains a chance at life in the next.

We don't know anything more about Barabbas' life before or after the events in the Passion narrative. But we know enough.

Jesus Christ died for people like Barabbas. He died for everyone, so that all children of the Father can have a chance at life.

Look to Christ on the cross for your gift of mercy, freely offered for each and every one of us.