



HOLY THURSDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Cleophus J. LaRue, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Francis Landey Patton Associate Professor of Homiletics, Department of Practical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ

Lection - John 13:21-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 21) After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.” (v. 22) The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. (v. 23) One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; (v. 24) Simon Peter

therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. (v. 25) So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?” (v. 26) Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.(v. 27) After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.” (v. 28) Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. (v. 29) Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the festival”; or, that he should give something to the poor. (v. 30) So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Holy Thursday/Maundy Thursday

Holy Thursday, also known as Maundy Thursday, falls on the Thursday before Easter. It commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus Christ with his disciples and the events of his passion which followed. Often, foot washing is included (John 13:3-17) and, in some churches, at the conclusion of the service, the stripping of the church may occur in which all textiles, crosses, and images are removed or covered until Easter eve. With the setting of the sun on Holy Thursday, the Easter Triduum begins. Triduum literally means “three days” and stretches from sunset on Holy Thursday, through Good Friday and to sunset on Easter. These holy days became a recognized part of the Christian liturgical year by the fourth century. The Christian Church continues to celebrate them today to prepare us for meeting the resurrected Christ on the third day.

Ways in which Holy Thursday (Maundy Thursday) can be incorporated into a worship service:

- A rite of foot washing may be held at this time;
- The congregation may gather in silence for what is known as a shortened worship of darkness;
- The stripping of all decoration in the sanctuary may also be a powerful moment;
- Your congregation can gather silently to hear the Passion narrative read; and
- A sermon of preparation for the hoped for resurrection of Jesus.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 13:21-30

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

On this Holy Thursday, so much is dark for so many. Newspaper articles, magazine cover stories, television reports, and website blogs cannot come close to summing up the devastation that so many are now facing around our world, in our country, all states, all cities, our neighborhoods and even in our families. On this Holy Thursday, many face the inevitability of their dark Fridays. We must never get so holy that we do not see that the pain of our brothers and sisters is heart wrenchingly real. We can't minimize it, pray it or preach it away. To whom shall we turn? To whom can we go in times like these? Is there a refuge when things take a turn for the worse? Or is ours the fate of Judas?

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

“When Things Take a Turn for the Worse”

Judas Iscariot is such a controversial figure in Christendom that much mystery and discussion continue to surround him. There is much about him that we do not know. We do not really know what the appendage "Iscariot" means. Some say it simply means the town from which he came. Thus, Judas Iscariot simply means Judas from a town called Kerioth. Others understand Iscariot to be associated with the vileness of his deed. Thus Judas Iscariot to them means Judas the one who gave Jesus over.

We do not really know how Judas died. Matthew says he "went and hanged himself," (Mt. 27:5) while Luke in the first chapter of Acts says he "fell headlong and burst open."

We do not really know his motive for handing Jesus over to his enemies. Some say he did it because he loved money. Matthew says he betrayed his Lord for thirty pieces of silver, while John outright calls Judas a thief.

Some say he had a secret grief toward Jesus that he could not overcome. In Albert Camus' novel The Plague there is a character named Cottard who has a "secret grief." While he does not reveal it to anyone, it affects how he interacts with everyone. Camus ascribes this imperfection to this character for he recognizes that such a complaint is common to the human situation. We all have a secret grief, and it affects what we do for people and what we do to people. The nature of Judas' secret grief we do not know. It is possible that he was troubled that the movement had not taken more of a political turn or maybe he even had trouble with Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. Perhaps he saw the claim as just demagoguery by another so-called leader claiming that he had come to save the people from their lives of despair under Roman rule.

Both Luke and John simply ascribe diabolic motives to the betrayal by saying that Judas betrayed Jesus when Satan entered into him. So we do not really know why he handed Jesus over to his enemies. But, according to our text, this one thing we do know about Judas: he rejected Jesus and walked out into the night.

What is our continued fascination with this figure? Almost two thousand years have come and gone since Judas gained notoriety by handing over our Lord to his enemies. But even with the passing of the years there is still something that is both offensive and frightening about Judas.

We find him offensive because of what he did to his friend Jesus--he handed him over into the hands of his enemies. We are offended by that for most of us can identify with the pain of being turned on by a friend. The wounds inflicted by a friend seem to go deeper and hurt more than the wounds inflicted by someone who cared nothing for us. David said in the 55th Psalm, "It was not my enemy who reproached me, for then I could bear it, but it was my friend." So we are offended by Judas because of what he did to his friend.

Judas not only offends us, but he also frightens us, for Judas is an unpleasant reminder to all of us that on any given day a faithful follower, like you or me, could turn from following Christ and stumble out into the night, caught up in the power of the prince of darkness and be quickly led to our death.

He frightens us even more when we try to put distance between ourselves and Judas by pointing out all that was wrong and rotten about him. We say Judas allowed himself to be used by that one who is opposed to the things of God, but have we not all at some point in our lives been used by that which is antithetical (totally opposing) to God? We all at some point in our lives have allowed ourselves to be taken over by evil schemes, harmful suggestions, and misguided intentions.

We say Judas lacked honesty and integrity for he stole from the money box over which he had been placed. But have we not all done some things for which we are now ashamed?

We say Judas was small-minded and mean spirited, for he complained when the woman anointed the feet of Jesus with a costly bottle of perfume--but we all have to pray from time to time and ask the Lord to help us not to major in minor things; not to drown in shallow water; nor to lose our soul behind stuff that doesn't amount to anything.

Well we say he was duplicitous and deceitful. On the night of the Last Supper when the Lord tried so desperately to reach him, Judas resented correction and resisted reconciliation. He was stubborn and bullheaded; once he made up his mind you couldn't turn him from his course. In a moment of empathetic truth, we see so much of ourselves in Judas.

And so, for whatever reason, Judas decided to walk out on Jesus. He turned from the light, lost his way, and stumbled out into the night. What, you may ask, could entice a person to turn away from Christ? Some people turn away from Jesus out of disillusionment. They thought the Christian religion offered immediate rewards, with little sacrifice, at no cost.

Some turn away from Christ when confronted with some unexpected loss or horrific ordeal in their lives. And because they were caught off guard, they think Jesus was also caught off guard or does not care. They seem unaware of the fact that nothing takes our Savior by surprise, and that Jesus cares for us when no one else does. In fact, he loved us before we loved him.

And then, as strange as it may seem, some people turn away from Christ because they say they want more out of life. They believe they have outgrown the Christian faith. They believe other avenues and interests can speak to their condition better than the claims of Christ. Whatever the reason, when you turn from Jesus Christ, you take a turn for the worse.

John says when Judas walked out it was night. When John says it was night he is not simply calling our attention to the clock, he is calling our attention to the condition of any person's soul when they turn from Christ. When Judas, by his own choice, turned from Christ, he cast his soul into spiritual and, therefore, the worst darkness.

There is a movie that came out some years ago titled "Dead Man Walking." It is the story of a man on death row, who, even though he still lives, he really is dead for he has been sentenced to death by lethal injection. The title of that movie is true of Judas, for Judas was a dead man walking for, whenever you turn from Christ, that is all you can be, for Christ is our only hope, there is no other name under heaven whereby men and women can be saved.

Judas, and sometimes we ourselves, do not recognize that we are dead men and women walking. We are dead!

We are dead to the movement of the Spirit
Dead to the leading of the Lord
Dead to deeper purposes
Dead to tender, loving kindness
Dead to God's will and God's way

If we walk away from God then we, too, become the title of this movie--dead men (and women) walking.

We ought to be honest about this today; it is hard sometimes to follow Christ. It gets hard as we endure the vagaries and vicissitudes of life. Hard as we endure the trials and tragedies that seem worse than they have ever been. Hard as we endure seasons of uncertainty and unexpected occurrences. Hard when it seems that life itself is against us, and it appears that there is just no way that things will work out alright; not this time. But my recommendation, my plea, my prayer, is do not leave, and go away, do not walk out on Jesus. For if you leave Jesus, you are a dead person walking.

Celebration

Why stay? Holy Thursday is the time for us to remember once again that Jesus alone is our help in ages past and our hope in the midst of whatever may come.

Whatever you have to endure by staying with the Lord, the Lord will more than make it up to you.

If you lose your friends, the Lord will raise up new friends for you.

If there is darkness and depression in your life, he'll give you a peace that surpasses all understanding.

If your name has been muddied and soiled by malicious false gossip, the Lord will clean up your name and those who soiled it will live to see it happen.

If you lose your way and are no longer sure which way to turn, the Lord will be a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path.

He alone is our peace. He alone is our hope. Even as we confront the fear of a gloomy Thursday and a dark Friday, our hearts are hopeful as we anticipate a Sunday resurrection. Christ is our resurrection; whatever comes to bury us, even in the worst of times, it cannot hold us down, for he will raise us again! Amen.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this text include:

Sights: Jesus and the disciples reclined on the floor around a table for a meal; the startled looks on the faces of some of the disciples as Jesus announces that one of them will betray him; the disciples looking at each other with suspicion trying to determine which of them will betray Jesus; Judas reclining next to Jesus, Jesus dipping bread into a dish and giving it to Judas; Jesus holding the common purse/treasury for the group; Judas' body movements as Satan enters him; night time; and

Sounds: The disciples murmuring; the rustling of food utensils and dishes; and the sound of bread dipped into oil.