

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

John 13: 2

In the Lenten meditation I put up for Monday of this week, I quoted Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem.

(In Scripture we find) "Whenever you face trial of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." But would not "to be tried" in our text mean "to be overwhelmed by trials"?

Indeed, it may seem that this trial is a very strong current that is most difficult to cross. Those who are not overwhelmed by the trial are the only ones who can overcome it; they are, so to speak, good swimmers who are not washed away by the current. The others, as they try, drop to the bottom.

Let us take Judas, for instance; he was tempted by greed. He could not, in a way, swim, across this temptation; he was lost, body and soul.

Cyril reflects the view of Judas that prevailed for most of the history of Christianity. Every compelling story needs a good villain – and while the story of Jesus' last days abounds with self-serving, fearful, and devious characters, Judas has been the standout scoundrel. Dante places Judas at the very bottom of the Inferno, where Satan gnaws at him, "*his head within and outside flails his legs.*" To this day, we don't call someone who's committed an act of betrayal a "Pilate" or a "Herod." We call them a "Judas."

Judas invites so much vilification because, of course, he is one of the disciples, one of the Twelve, one of the chosen whom Jesus loves. Herod and Pilate have never been followers of Jesus, let alone been friendly with, him, close to him, part of his inner circle. It's always been clear where they stand: against Jesus, his message, and his movement.

But when the Temple police come to arrest Jesus, Judas identifies him with a kiss. Judas turns a kiss, a sign of love and intimacy, into an act of malice. What could be worse? What could wound more deeply? And the Gospels tell us that Judas betrayed Jesus for money, - as Cyril says, motivated by greed – and surely that's a betrayal not only of Jesus' person, but of everything Jesus has taught and exemplified in working to bring about God's realm of justice.

All of us, I'm sure, have known betrayal, and all of us, I suspect, have known betrayal by someone who has been very close to us – someone we've loved, cared for, and trusted. Trusted, of course, because where there is no trust, there can be no betrayal. Jesus never trusted Pilate, never trusted Herod, but he must have trusted Judas to invite him into the small circle of the Twelve, and so that kiss of betrayal must have been excruciating.

I think about, and pray about, betrayal, frequently. I said on Ash Wednesday that one of my Lenten disciplines would be to pray for my enemies, and I have attempted to maintain that practice. Someone asked me last Sunday if I'd come up with 40 – one for every day of Lent. I replied that that had not been my aim; and that I had found a small cast of characters occurring in my prayer, appearing and reappearing. And these were not remote figures or philosophical opponents. They weren't faceless homophobes or fanatical protestors at women's health clinics.

No, my prayer life was peopled with folks I've been very close to, people I've loved and trusted and tried to care for. And people who I believed reciprocated that love and care and trust – and then something happened, something went wrong, the relationships turned bitter, blame-filled, and destructive.

I'm not talking just about romantic relationships, although for many of us those provide dramatic and memorable examples of betrayal. And when a man I loved was leaving me many years ago, my priest helped me to understand what was happening. He helped me to enter the inner world of my soon-to-be –ex lover. He said, "I'm afraid you have become the symbol of all his pain."

You have become the symbol of all his pain. When I can remember that brilliant and deeply spiritual interpretation, my life and work become more manageable, at least marginally.

Many years ago, the year before my ordination, I kept vigil with a young woman who was dying of cancer. Sandra was the sister of one of my closest friends, and I spent hours in the hospital with her almost every day for the last eight months of her life. Relatives and friends of hers stayed with me when they came to Boston to visit. I officiated at her memorial service.

And then, over the next year or so, all her friends and family withdrew from my life. Even my dear friend, her sister, stopped speaking to me. I had no explanation for what had happened, and I was devastated. Finally, maybe four years later, I was preparing to officiate at the memorial service for an eleven year old boy who had died

of cancer, and I began to have overwhelming memories of that other premature death and how I'd lost so much afterward – not only Sandra herself but all of her family and my close friend.

I dared to call my friend and got her on the phone, and asked what had happened. And I had one of the most vivid and powerful experiences of my life. She flung accusations at me so bizarre that I could not believe what I was hearing. As she talked I saw images of that folk tale in which a princess's words come out of her mouth as snakes and frogs. I had an image of her throwing dung at me. I'm not ordinarily visited by visuals – but I felt assaulted by mental pictures then.

The experience was devastating. But it was also, once I recovered somewhat, helpful and even healing. Our interchange had given me an entrée into the inner world of my former friend, and I understood that her reality was not my reality, that whatever we had shared was broken and vanished beyond recall. I had become the symbol of all her pain, and probably her family's pain, and she had had to cast me off, cast me out.

And I believe that's what often happens when those we love and trust and care for betray us. We have *become symbols of their pain*. We cease, in some profound way, to become *persons* to them, and have become *personifications*: living examples of some pain, some problem they are trying to avoid, or deny, or exorcise, from their lives.

I'm not saying this interpretation excuses their betrayal, their vilification of us. But perhaps it helps to explain – it does for me, it helps me to believe I understand. Our relationships may not, probably will not, ever be repaired. But this interpretation gives me some window to the inner world of those who betray me, and offers some opportunity, some possibility, of finding compassion within myself, some chance for internal peace and reconciliation. And that may be all I can hope for.

Well, and what about the inner world of Judas? Did Jesus become the symbol of all his pain? We don't know, we can't know. Was there really even a Judas Iscariot who was one of the Twelve, or is he a creation of the Gospelists, invented to exemplify our human tendency to betray one another?

Because that's the other side of the story, isn't it? We've all been betrayed, as I said earlier. But by the same token, we've all been betrayers ourselves, too. Haven't we? Perhaps not with malice aforethought, perhaps inadvertently. And most probably we are not even aware of many of the small acts of betrayal we've perpetrated on others – or what they've perceived as treachery while we've been clueless about their

expectations, perceptions, and disappointments. We've all been Judases, somehow, in some measure. We are all complicit in human frailty, in the human temptation to allow our personal needs to trump relationship, to violate trust through weakness or selfishness.

I said earlier that throughout most of Christian history, Judas has personified evil, but in recent centuries there's been a shift. As theologians have moved from emphasis on the divinity of Jesus to a focus on his human side, so has a new openness to the humanity of Judas emerged. In Caravaggio's painting, *The Taking of Christ*, from around 1602, "*There are seven figures... St John, Jesus, Judas, two soldiers, a man and a soldier. There is a lantern being held by the man at the right. Some art historians hold that the man holding the lantern is Caravaggio's self-portrait.*" (Wikipedia) Is the artist suggesting our commonality with Judas?

And perhaps there is no more radical interpretation of Judas than that of Jorge Luis Borges, who suggested in a story in 1944 "that God 'stooped to become man for the redemption of the human race, ' one who would sin and 'be condemned to damnation,' that God 'chose an abject existence: He was Judas.'" (*NYTimes Book Review*, Judas, by Susan Gubar, reviewed by Adam Kirsch, 4.5. 2009)

That may be a stretch: God choosing to become incarnate as Judas. It's a fictional suggestion, a thought experiment. But the idea reminds us that Judas shared our common humanity, was chosen and beloved by Jesus, until something went terribly and fatally awry. That possibility – that peril of betrayal – exists in all our lives. It's the risk, the cost, of love, of trust, of relationship. Something may go terribly and fatally awry.

As we walk with Jesus through this dark and dangerous week, we surround ourselves with that knowledge, that awareness. Betrayal may await us around any corner. Trust is risk. Love is cost.

And yet, in faith, we persevere. We keep on trusting. We keep on loving. And in the name of all that is human, frail, and in need of redemption, we kneel in humility to wash one another's feet.

Amen