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Judas. The Apostle

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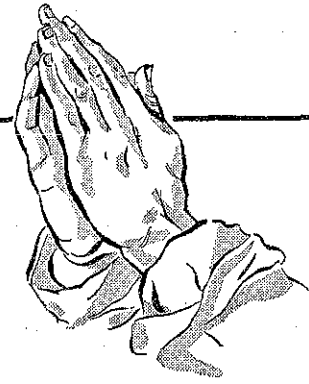


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Judas, the Apostle

by KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

What is attempted here is a matter of justice. A man was guilty of a great sin—a sin so great that the whole universe revolted at its enormity. There was darkness over the earth because a man had been untrue to his Friend. There is no arguing about the greatness of Judas' sin. This man was a betrayer. Before all that is good, noble, creaturely, he stands condemned. And out of his own mouth he speaks condemnation: "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood."

There is question here not of Judas' guilt. That is patent. The question is rather, "Was there no good in Judas?" Or "Was Judas evil from the beginning?" If it is a matter of justice to bring evil to light, it is also a matter of justice to recognize goodness. Even Judas has his rights.

Since light is seen clearest in the dark of night, we will examine what goodness we can find in Judas against the background of evil that was in him. St. John says, "He was a thief." Not a great robber, but a penny thief. Being a practical man, he had been entrusted with the purse out of which the twelve and Our Lord lived. He might be called the purchasing agent for the apostolic college. The amount in the purse can never have been very great, and therefore the sum Judas stole from it must have been small. Judas the Apostle was a petty thief. There must be small betrayals before a big betrayal.

Judas was a practical man. He knew the signs of the times, and he knew when to act to his own advantage. The last preaching tour, in marked contrast to the earlier tours, had met with meager success. There was little Judas could hope to gain from remaining with a prophet of uncertain merit, a prophet who had spoken His simplicities and had not been heard. In the beginning, Judas thought, there had been hope for great things. Miracles had been worked. He had seen them with his own eyes.

There was promise in the prophet, but as the months went by and Jesus

set His footsteps steadfastly toward Jerusalem and death, it became apparent to Judas that what was promised was too shadowy, too remote, for his tastes. A practical man must save himself and enrich himself in the process. Silver in the hand is more substantial than promises from the lips of one whose kingdom is not of this world. On his own initiative Judas went to the chief priests and said, "What will you pay me for handing him over to you?"

Often it is the particular manner in which men do evil rather than the evil itself which reveals the essential magnitude of their malice. Männer has a way of laying bare the clear lines which define an evil too great and too deep to be seen in the sinful act itself.

In two incidents the manner of Judas' betrayal reveals the greatness of his sin. When Our Lord announced at the Last Supper, "One of you will betray me," the Apostles, each fearful that he might be the guilty person, asked, "Lord, is it I?" In the midst of the confusion Judas asked, "Lord, is it I?" Here is a man who is sure of himself. Here is that self-possession which maintains all the civilities and deference while it destroys.

The other incident is the kiss in the Garden of Gethsemani. Not only sanctity reaches perfection, but also malice. There is a kind of inverted perfection, a refinement in evil, about the kiss with which Judas betrayed his Master. In the choice of a kiss there is a delicacy which only a perverted sense of propriety would discover and use. Still the soul of self-possession, the man of courtesy, the Apostle walked "straight up to Jesus" and kissed him.

This is the Judas we know. But was there no good in Judas? Was the traitor evil from the beginning?

Without attempting to dispel "the mystery of iniquity" which surrounds Judas, it must be said that in the beginning he was a devoted Apostle. He followed Our Lord because he loved Him and believed in Him.

Judas was an organizer with a re-

served graciousness. He had been placed in charge of the common purse because he was efficient without being offensive. Judas had won the respect of the other Apostles, and even when he left the Last Supper after Christ announced that there was a traitor in their midst, no one suspected him.

A man is judged by his loves. What did Judas love? There is, undoubtedly, his love of money. But there is more danger of overestimating Judas' rapacity than of underestimating it. A true miser is grasping, which Judas certainly was. However, a true miser, come what may, would not return the money, would not throw the money away, and would not hang himself in despair. On the strength of Judas' repentance and the violence with which he threw the money on the temple floor, we are forced to conclude that Judas had another love: Jesus Christ.

Judas had loved his Friend and Master and had been loved in return. They had lived together for three years, and, as Christ reminded Judas, they had broken bread together. Though Judas would violate the bond of love between them, its existence can hardly be denied. By his betrayal he attempted to destroy that love. He was to find out that his love for Christ was stronger than he suspected. After he repented of his betrayal he committed a far greater crime. He would not believe in Christ's love for him, in His willingness to forgive. Judas drew lines and said: "Beyond this point Christ's love cannot go. This, Christ cannot do." Not to believe in Christ's love was the ultimate betrayal.

We tend to put Judas in a class by himself, and this is to do him an injustice. Without belittling the greatness of his sin, our own great betrayals must be recognized as not unsimilar to his. But in this we differ. We believe Christ can do all things. Christ can love the sinner and forgive. The Christian life is an attempt to be worthy of the love we have once, many times betrayed.