

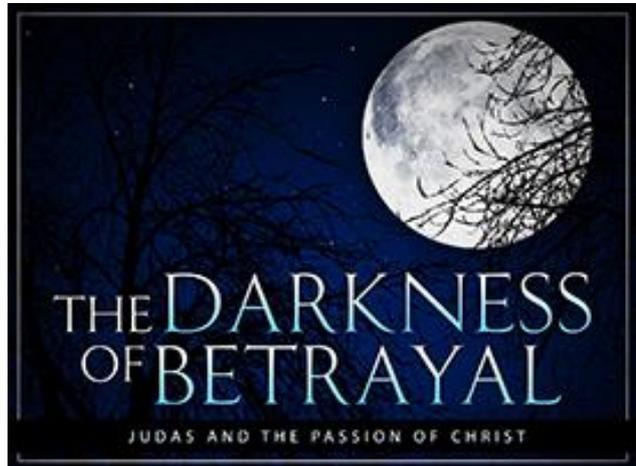
DARKNESS OF BETRAYAL

12th February 2017

Readings: Matthew 26:1-5; 14-25

I must admit I did scratch my head when my daughter announced the name she planned for her son - Pheniox. Though it's not the most common of names it's lovely, and has certainly grown on me. However I can tell you a couple of names that were never in contention. In fact I've never met, or even heard of, anyone with either names. They're both Biblical. Any guesses? - Judas or Jezebel. Why? Because they're the most infamous of villains in the Bible.

Today as we come to our second message on The Passion of Christ we'll come face to face with one of these characters - Judas, friend and betrayer of Jesus



Prayer

I've a puzzle for you? Let me set the scene. It's the Last Supper and Jesus' disciples surround him; twelve men prayerfully chosen, hand picked by the Lord himself, constant companions for three years. So close they know each other like brothers. Now, on a number of occasions Jesus had troubled his disciples by saying, "The Son of Man will be handed over and crucified". The disciples naturally assumed the betrayal would be at the hands of an outsider. However, part way through the meal Jesus drops a bombshell. Verse 21 of Chapter 26.

"I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me". Matthew 26:21

From the general "I will be betrayed" to the unthinkable. "One of you will betray me".

I love the way John's Gospel put's their response...

His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant.
John 13:22

Finally they muster courage and (verse 22)...

... began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord? Matthew 26:22

It's like, "What, one of us, Jesus - no way! We've been watching our backs expecting treachery from religious leaders or their hired men, not from one of us."

So here's the puzzle. How come this is what they said and none of them saw it was Judas. s. Given that Jesus then dropped the biggest of hints saying "The one who dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me" (Matt 26:23), given that John's Gospel tells us Judas left before the meal was finished, and given they knew each other like brothers - how come the disciples didn't see it coming? As Judas walked out the door why didn't they say, "Ahh so it's Judas. He's the one. You know I've always had my suspicions about Judas. Remember when we were in Galilee and we prayed for lepers to be healed... his lepers never were. And when we cast out demons, his demons, well... they never came out". But they never said this. They never saw it coming. I find this a puzzle.

But you see the reason the other disciples never saw it coming was because Judas' lepers were healed and Judas' demons did come out. The Bible tells us all the disciples had success in this area and nowhere indicates Judas was the exception. You see like them, Judas was exercising a miraculous ministry, bringing great blessings to many people, so how on earth could this man, their brother, chosen by Jesus for the inner circle, be a betrayer? This was why the disciples "stared at one another at a loss to know which of them he meant".

So what's the background behind this most famous of betrayals. A betrayal that blindsided the disciples but not Jesus. Why did Judas do it? What was he thinking? What pushed him over the edge?... To answer these questions and explore the implications for us, let's go back a day or so from the Last Supper and we'll trace the events that lead to this betrayal

Back in verses 1 & 2 Jesus predicted he'd be betrayed. Verses 3-5 show the religious leaders plotting Jesus' death, but without the means, However, this all changes the day before the Last Supper at another meal. A meal hosted by a certain Simon, with Jesus and his disciples among the honoured guests. Now into this meal comes someone uninvited. Let's pick up the story in Matthew 26:7

A woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. Matthew 26:7

This uninvited woman did the unexpected. Breaking all social conventions she pours expensive perfume onto Jesus' head. How expensive? John's Gospel tells us "300 denarii", a year's wages. Pause for a moment. Think about the income of the primary earner in your house. Now imagine entering an up-market perfume shop and spending this amount on one bottle of perfume. Staggering!

The disciples see this clearly and waste no time passing judgment.

... they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." Matthew 26:8-9

On the surface a concern genuine and with merit. We all have limited resources. The Bible charges us to be wise with our finances so we can be generous to God -

especially helping those in need. So the disciples comments are pragmatic and practical (and, as an aside, evidence that the first disciples were Scottish Presbyterians).

However, there's more going on here. Much more. John's Gospel is particularly helpful for he tells us who made the most fuss and why.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot... objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." John 12:4-5

Yes, it was Judas who was most upset about the waste of money but his motivation wasn't helping the poor - far from it.

He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. John 12:6

And so the betrayer was first a thief. Judas didn't see a year's wages wasted and the poor missing out. He saw a year's wages wasted that he could get his hands on. And not only did Jesus turn down this potential windfall but there he was banging on about his death! He says...

The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Matthew 26:11-12

Judas must have thought, "Not only have I missed out on all that cash but there's Jesus going on about his death. I don't know why I bother". And you know it's only a short step from here to, "I wonder how much I can get if I hand Jesus over?"

Judas, called by Jesus, three years his disciple, having sat under Jesus' teaching and performed many miracles - turns his back on his Lord for financial gain. So after the meal in Simon's house Judas slips away. And as he's making his way to the Chief Priests let's pause and consider the implications. Judas was a man called by Jesus, successful in ministry, and on all outward appearances an exemplary Christian. Yet, to the amazement of his closest Christian friends, he walks out, washes his hands and even betrays Jesus.

Here's a question: Have you ever known someone like that. Someone who was a full on Christian, who just walked away. I remember as a student attending a vibrant university church where there was a Christian whom I looked up to as a role model. He was on staff at the church, my home group leader, he led short term missionary trips had a lovely wife and young family - who happened to be having an affair with someone in the church not his wife. I remember being devastated. How could this man so outwardly a model Christian inwardly betray Jesus for so long?

What this man and Judas had in common was they focused on outward while neglecting the inward. They went through religious motions while letting their devotion to Jesus fail. In all likelihood they were sincere and dedicated to begin with but it's so easy to become mechanical about our faith and while starving the soul. So easy to show people we're ticking the box while forgetting to delight in Jesus. So easy to calculating the benefits while letting affection for Jesus shrivel and die.

You see Judas was always calculating - working out the minimum to keep God happy so he could do what he wanted with the rest. And we easily do the same. We think, "Let me see... if I go to church on Sunday and have couple of half hour slots reading the Bible, that'll keep God happy, allow me to do what I really want and he'll bless me when I do". Or thinking, "Tithing, hmmm 10% -after tax, after I've taken out mortgage and car repayments and surely God wants me to have a holiday so I'll tithe what's left".

Just like this, Judas was always calculating. Thinking, "Look, Jesus is promising to set up a kingdom, his miracles are amazing, he'll kick out the Romans for sure. And when he does I'll be set up and the money will flow" Yes, he calculated. But the problem with such bookkeeping is as soon as Jesus falls on the wrong side of the ledger - banging on about his burial and turning down big sums of money - Judas dumps Jesus - and does so for a profit.

My challenge to each one of us today is this, "While our Christian life may look good on the outside, are we feeding the soul? Or is our outside a calculated cover, a concession to a cost benefit ratio. If I do the religious thing God will bless my children, If it is, then I'm in danger of dumping Jesus as soon as the cost gets greater than any benefit".

So how can we protect ourselves from this. I'm prone to this thinking as much as the next person. Absolutely. I find myself balancing cost and personal gain in following Jesus - and it can be frightening when you stop and realize what you're doing. So how can we protect ourselves from putting up a front while neglecting our inner self?

Well let's go back into the text and dig a little. Verses 15-16. Remember having been denied access to a year's wage to pilfer and tired of Jesus banging on about his death Judas approaches the chief priests. ...

... "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over. Matthew 26:15-16

Thirty pieces of silver. Why is this significant. Apart from fulfilling a prophecy spoken hundred's of year's earlier¹ this price points back to the uninvited guest.

¹ Zechariah 11:13

How much was the perfume used to prepare Jesus body for death? 300 denarii.
How much was Jesus betrayed for? 30 silver coins. A pittance.

What does this tell us about Judas? What does it tell us of the woman? Her devotion to Jesus was overwhelming compared to the miserly, pitiful sum of betrayal. If we want to avoid the danger of working on the outward while neglecting the inward, if we want to put a stop to our calculating faith, if we want to squash any hint of betrayal to Jesus that lurks, we must learn the devotion of the uninvited guest. And it's hard. It is so much easier to be mechanical, tick some boxes and run after what we really want - the perfect family, better job, greater income. It's so hard - even impossible. But there is hope... listen to Jesus' words to the church in Ephesus. A church doing the right things on the outside but crumbling on the inside. To this church Jesus said...

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance... You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary... Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. Revelation 2:2-5

For those with a mechanical, keeping up appearances, even commended by others, but devoid of affection for Christ listen to this warning and hope. The warning, "You have forsaken your first love". The hope, Remember, repent, put into practice. Remember when Jesus first thrilled your heart. Remember how you responded with gratitude and acts of service - nothing was too great to give in service to Christ. Remember these times. Remember and pray - imploring God to restore your first love for Christ. Implore that devotion will well up on the inside. A devotion that is fresh, full of light, full of life, bringing joy to the Father Heart.

It is my prayer, as go through this series on the Passion of Christ, we will encounter Jesus a fresh. That as we see all he gave up for us, when we so unworthy our calculating, so mean spirited - when see this contrast that God will replace our heart of stone with a soft heart filled with devotion to our dear Lord.

When Jesus said at that Last Supper, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me" he was speaking also to you and I. And we reply, "Surely not I, Lord". And Jesus says, "Yes you Douglas - but I will still die for you. Return to your first love". And not just me - but each here. We all reply "Surely not I" and Jesus says, "Yes, you - and yet I still go to the cross for you. So repent, return to me. Return to your first love.

Let's pray.