Homily preached at King's College Chapel

Wednesday in Holy Week 2018

Matthew 27.3-10

There is no ambivalence in the bible about Judas Iscariot. He is 'the betrayer', 'the one who betrayed him', 'the one would betray him', 'the one who was about to betray him'. And they are all just variations on an epithet. He is also shown offering to betray Jesus to the Jewish leaders - in return for money; and then doing it – with a kiss. And then of course we have his horror or fear at what he has done, and his gruesome death.

This last bit of the story only happens in Matthew's gospel (as we just heard), and in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, by way of a flashback explaining why they needed to find a new member of the Twelve. Interestingly the two stories are not consistent, however cleverly you try to make them fit. In the stories treasured and told about Jesus there were obviously variants on the basic, accepted fact, that Judas died horribly, and very soon after Jesus. In assembling the canon of scripture, the Church clearly did not worry about such narrative incompatibility, which tells us something rather important about how we read the bible.

Another important aspect in how we read the Bible is in how words take on meaning, spiritual and even emotive meaning, in Christian tradition, or in different parts of that tradition. So, for one thing, when we read 'betray', that's a translation of the Greek word meaning 'hand over'. A word describing a physical action takes on more meaning in its context, and in subsequent Christian understanding (and understandably so). That physical act has the character of betrayal, of treachery. Indeed, it is like the epitome of betrayal, at least to those of us who are caught up in the story of Jesus, and committed to it.

Then, somewhat contrastingly, the word Matthew uses of Judas 'repenting', after seeing Jesus condemned, that word is not the usual word in the New Testament for repentance, the *metanoia* word (which also means conversion, turning). Matthew chooses a word which is less loaded: he 'changed his mind'. Subsequent Christian tradition, or perhaps some parts of it, have amplified that to remorse, regret and horror.

Being a bit alert to these nuances of language and meaning are usefully part of a far bigger alertness we need to have when thinking about Judas. And that is, it would be profoundly *ironic* to forget the infinitely merciful and forgiving patience of Jesus, which is probably what drove Judas to a pitch of treacherous frustration. Which is to say, however much we gasp at what he did, however cold our stomach goes at the betraying kiss, it is not for us to judge Judas. No, not even Judas. It is not for us to consign him to

hell. When Jesus said 'when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself' (John 12.32), he was telling us something about the radical reach of his saving actions. This is the same Jesus who also said 'do not judge, so that you may not be judged.' (Matthew 7.1) In this week where we look at Jesus lifted up on the cross and then lifted from the tomb, we should unclench the fist of our heart and reach for his sacrificial love, his defeat of death. We should let that love renew us who are loved beyond measure, but who are also much in need of it.

A few years ago the Almeida Theatre in London put on a very punchy and provocative play called 'The Last Days of Judas Iscariot', by Stephen Adly Guirgis. It's set in an annexe of Purgatory called Hope, a tribunal where people can appeal to be released from Hell. Two very ambitious lawyers attempt to bolster their own positions by taking on the case for Judas; a last-ditch appeal, but most definitely not one instigated by him. He is absolutely catatonic with despair and resistance.

The language of the play is like David Mamet's – New York street argot, not for the faint-hearted. But it deals with some very big things in a quite brilliant way, and often very funnily. After three hours of wrangling around the whys and hows of Judas doing what he did and being in Hell, the last scene of the play gets to the very heart of things. Jesus himself has come again – again! - to find Judas (he has clearly done this a million times before). Judas repels him – again - and retreats into his usual expressionless state, his catatonia.

There are no more words. But the final stage direction in the text of the play is simple but penetrating in its guess at a mystery. It reads like this:

> *Jesus sighs, takes off his shirt, plunges it in the bucket, rinses it, and begins to wash Judas' feet. Jesus washes meticulously and with care. He washes. And washes. Perhaps the water is mixed with tears.*
>
> *Lights fade.*