

Wednesday in Holy Week **April 12, 2006**

A Reading from John

[Jesus said:] “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will hand me over.”

The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”

Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the piece of bread he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After the piece of bread Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.”

Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. 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. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Humanity has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.”

(John 13:20-32)

The Word of the Lord

Homily by Rev Timothy A Leitzke

I want to apologize for Judas Iscariot. I want to give an apology in the classical sense, like Socrates' *Apology*—an explanation of why Judas Iscariot does what he does. It could seem terribly odd for a Christian to want to do such a thing; after all, he is the man who sent Jesus to die. Would any of us willingly send Jesus to his death!? The answer is “yes”. All of us would, at some point or another, condemn Jesus to death. So hear me out on this one.

One has to start with the *name* Judas Iscariot. What does “Iscariot” mean? Some bible scholars think it meant “man from the town of Kerioth”. Others think it derived from the word for zealot, a radical religious faction in First Century Palestine. “Judas”, however, is not a difficult name to figure out. It is the name of the southern kingdom, the real true blue Jews. Our word “Jew” comes from the word “Judean”. There's no mistaking it in the Gospel of John: no matter how pretty it gets, it delivers a sustained, toxic polemic against the Jews. It is no accident that the tradition about Jesus' death includes a betrayer whose name is “Jew”. By the time the gospels were written the followers of Jesus were very angry with those Jews who had not followed Jesus. Blaming Jesus' death on the Judeans was an easy step, and from there

including in the story an evil betrayer—a zealot, an embezzler—whose very name was “Jew” was an easy step.

Judas Iscariot exists in our faith literature as an attempt to explain a tragedy. He is the person to whom we can assign all guilt for our unbelievable loss and grief. Jesus had a following, but not something bad enough to get him killed. The Romans wouldn't think twice about crucifying Jesus, but they didn't just crucify at random. You had to do something, or be a threat of some sort. By the time Jesus got to Jerusalem at the Passover something had really ticked off Pilate.

If you're not sure what it could be we read through it on Palm Sunday. Jesus' triumphant entrance to Jerusalem *was* indeed a threat. People were hailing him as King of the Jews. Independent kings were not popular folks in the eyes of the Romans, so they killed Jesus, mainly to shut up everyone else. How do you explain such a thing? What does that kind of ending mean? Who is this Jesus? Who can Jesus be to me now that he was killed in such a way?

By the time John wrote his gospel, blaming the Jews was the obvious thing to do. It is too much to discard this classic piece of faith literature because of its anti-Jewish flavor. It's just too powerful a story. John's gospel offers some of our most treasured words of faith and comfort. We

read from John at funerals. We read from John at weddings. John gives us the good shepherd, the bread of life, and a Jesus who is compassionate beyond all measure. John, like all the gospels, struggles with the greatest challenge before all Christians: what does it mean that Christ was crucified? Sadly, part of his answer—as with that of the rest of the New Testament—blames another group, far closer to us in faith than we would want to admit.

Despite Judas Iscariot, John still delivers the gospel. That's because despite Jesus' horrific ending—indeed *because of* Jesus' horrific ending—Jesus delivered God's good news. If God was in Jesus the Christ, then God was there at the crucifixion—God was crucified. When the Son of Humanity is glorified, lifted up, all of us can see God. We see that God is among us for our sake. We see that God hurts like we hurt. We see that God washes away any sins we have against God just so that there won't be anything to detract from our relationship with God. We see a God who would rather die than have anything separating us.

Judas is our easy scapegoat. We don't like the nasty truth that given the right set of circumstances we each would have done what he did. When we scapegoat Judas we ignore all the good that comes from Christ. If the crucifixion exposes

our sinfulness it also brings to light the forgiveness of that sinfulness. If the crucifixion exposes our condemnation to pain and death it also brings to light God's triumph over pain and death. The Son of Humanity is lifted up. We don't need to blame some guy whose name is "Jew". We could blame ourselves, but the crucifixion calls us to look through blame and beyond blame to the promise that is sealed on the cross—God's promise: Life, Forgiveness, Salvation, and presence with us unto Death ...and don't be so certain that Death is the end. Amen