

MARY, JUDAS AND PETER

Readings: Gen. 39,40 Psa. 44 Mat. 26

It was two days before the Passover. It was two days before one of the three great feasts and holidays in the year. Think of this as being as far away from today as Wednesday.

When Israel were about to leave Egypt, it would have been with feelings of apprehension. They were to leave an admittedly unpleasant, but none the less secure and predictable environment of captivity in Egypt, for the open road and no clear idea where that would lead. They were obliged to do certain things in connection with the Passover lamb, on pain of death. When they left it was in fact because they were forced out by the Egyptians. They had no option.

The remembrance of this incident was instituted as a feast, so the people would be able to look back and see the deliverance by the Lord, and be thankful. There are surprisingly few records of how this feast was kept. We know Israel kept the feast in Sinai, and when Joshua led them into Canaan. There is a record of how the people kept the feast when Hezekiah was king; he apparently re instituted it after a lapse due to their falling away to idolatry. This exercise was repeated a little later under Josiah, the boy king. After the Babylonian captivity the Passover was again celebrated, as the people began to reconstruct the temple in Jerusalem. It is unlikely there was any celebration in Babylon, because they had been specifically commanded not to celebrate it anywhere other than the place of the Lords choice.

In spite of the general lack of reference to this yearly celebration, it was certainly respected in New Testament times. Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem yearly at this feast, and there are two references in John in connection with the feast, not including the last Passover.

The accounts all depict the feast as a time of great joy and thanksgiving, there is therefore some incongruity in the celebration of the last Passover. The disciples were anticipating a joyful holiday feast, while Jesus was apparently not in the holiday mood. They were preparing to celebrate deliverance from slavery, he was preparing for a humiliating and painful death. This dichotomy may help us to appreciate why the disciples appeared to be so insensitive to the needs of their master at this time.

There were perhaps a few people who understood something of what lay ahead. They could not know as Jesus did, but they were emotionally close enough to him to know something was up. These were some of the women who were with Jesus, particularly Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus. John's record identifies the woman with the ointment as Mary, and he also tells us that it might have been sold for three hundred pence, which was a year's wages. The cost was not important to Mary. Her objective was to provide appropriate service, whatever the cost. She had been blessed by the master, having her brother restored to life. She understood the gospel. She loved her

Lord. It was her opportunity to let Jesus know she cared. She could sympathize. She would provide whatever comforting balm she could, that his troubles might be mitigated.

The disciples were upset at what they saw as shocking waste. Judas Iscariot was the leader in this matter, but his motivation was not love for his master. On the contrary he was thinking about all that money he could have in the purse, and how he could spend it! Jesus did not need them to express their thoughts. He was able to discern them even though they were unexpressed.

Do we realise how strong were Judas' thoughts about this money? He was obsessed. He needed money, and having this potential source of income wasted in the anointing of Jesus, his mind turned to other devious means of getting rich quickly. He turned around and bargained with the chief priests for a reward for turning Jesus over to them. This may have seemed like a scheme which could not fail. He would easily get the money, and Jesus would walk away from his captors, as he had on many occasions walked away from the crowds who pressed upon him. Everyone could benefit except the priests, and many times Jesus had criticized them!

We must not dismiss the incident without looking for instruction. Judas was merely permitting his lustful nature get the upper hand, so much so that he abandoned all propriety in order to achieve his personal and selfish objective. Let us hope we do not have the same problem Judas had, where we are prepared to stoop so low to satisfy selfish and unlawful desires! However, our nature being what it is, it will only be by diligence that we will avoid such tendencies. Our weakness may not be for money, but for power and authority, or some other grand indulgence. We may not steal money, but are we good stewards of other people's time and resources with which we might be entrusted? Do we look to our own sufficiency, or do we think first about the needs of Jesus; this is the contrast between Judas and Mary.

There is something else remarkable about Judas, and his position amongst the disciples. He was their treasurer, keeping the bag. They knew he was a thief, yet Jesus did not expel him from the company. How can we reconcile this with Paul's words to the Corinthians?

(1 Cor 6:9-10 KJV) "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, {10}Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God."

We also have Jesus own words concerning the fate of Judas, we read it this morning.

(Mat. 26:24 KJV) "The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born."

The strong implication of condemnation for his actions was not cause for Jesus to remove or exclude Judas from the company. We do not find any record that Jesus singled him out for special correction, as he did Peter on more than one occasion. There has to be a lesson here, that personal misdemeanours are not necessarily ecclesial business, although each has a responsibility to help the other in the way of life.

To return to Mary and the ointment. Judas thought this was a waste, but Jesus acknowledged this as a good work, in preparation for his burial. He would not always be with them. Now how did Mary know this was what was needed? It may be she was guided by the spirit, but it is also likely she had developed a natural sympathy with Jesus which enhanced her understanding of his needs, his feelings and his future work. Such a sympathy would come from careful listening to his words, and much time spent in his company. There is the gentle and intuitive woman here, a class which it seems may be rapidly shrinking, an attitude which is going out of vogue and could become extinct.

After his creation Adam was invited to find a companion from among the beasts of the earth. There was none suitable for his needs. Brother Thomas reflects as follows.

“But in the formation of a companion for the first man, the Lord Elohim created her upon a different principle. She was to be a dependent creature; and a sympathy was to be established between them, by which they should be attached inseparably. It would not have been fit, therefore, to have given her an independent origin from the dust of the ground. Had this been the case, there would have been about the same kind of attachment between men and women as subsists among the creatures below them. The woman's companionship was designed to be intellectually and morally sympathetic with "the image and glory of God", whom she was to revere as her superior. The sympathy of the mutually independent earthborns of the field, is purely sensual; and in proportion as generations of mankind lose their intellectual and moral likeness to the Elohim, and fall under the dominion of sensuality; so the sympathy between men and women evaporates into mere animalism. But, I say, such a degenerate result as this was not the end of her formation. She was not simply to be "the mother of all living"; but to reflect the glory of man as he reflected the glory of God.”

There is the potential for such delight and beauty in the relationship between a man and a woman! Sometimes we seem to get bogged down in the mechanical elements when things go awry, and forget about the great strength to be derived from the relationship. It derives from the unique creation of man and woman. Like the beasts, man was formed of the dust of the ground, but unlike them, he was made in the image of the Elohim. He was given certain powers not bestowed upon the animals, and the purpose was that he might glorify his maker.

God made man such that he needed companionship to help him reflect God's glory. The beasts of the field were brought before him in order that he might find a suitable helper, but none was found. It was not because of deficiencies in the created work, but because of the special needs of man. Domesticated animals can, and have provided comfort for many, but that benefit is limited. Adam needed a help meet for him, not just a companion. Can we understand how important this relationship is? It is for help to stay in the ways of righteousness, to honour the Creator.

The means of Eve's creation made her specially suitable for this work. She was not created out of the ground, but out of Adam. She was bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. It is for this reason there are such sympathies between the sexes. This we believe to have been a significant motivating factor for Mary, not in this case as a wife to a husband, but as a woman to a man whom she loved. Again we cannot help but notice the sharp contrast between her response to Jesus, and that of Judas Iscariot.

There is another point made by brother Thomas that is highly relevant now. He wrote, as we quoted, "...as generations of mankind lose their intellectual and moral likeness to the Elohim, and fall under the dominion of sensuality; so the sympathy between men and women evaporates into mere animalism". How accurately this describes what we see around us today! Have our sisters become desensitized to their proper function by reason of the pressures of the world and their peers therein? No, they have not. But the risk is there, and increasingly so as the world sinks deeper into a condition of amorality, and the sisters have to become more involved with the world and its business.

We must move on.

Judas went to the priests to ask for money, as we have mentioned. This seems to have been his motivating factor, the need for money. He is apparently devoid of any conscience of what he is about, until it is too late. In the mean time the disciples prepare for the Passover.

Arrangements had been made for them to eat it in an upper room, to which they repaired in the evening. The twelve would be looking forward to a fine feast and the camaraderie usually associated with a holiday meal. Jesus was looking forward to the crucifixion.

As they sat at the meal he challenged them with a statement of fact.

(Mat. 26:21 KJV) "And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me."

One must wonder what this meant to the disciples? Jesus had told them before that this would happen, as we read last week.

(Mat. 20:17-19 KJV) "And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said unto them, {18}Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests

and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, {19}And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again."

At that time they did not seem to understand what he had said to them, but now there would have been an earnestness in Jesus which they could not ignore, even though they would not understand it. How could anyone betray Jesus to such ignominy? With Judas, they would have witnessed how he had escaped the rulers time and time again. He had always been able to confound them with his answers to their trick questions. Beside this, they had no idea who among them would have any motive for such a terrible thing. It is hardly surprising they were confused! In their sorrow they began to ask Jesus who should do this.

(Mark 14:19 KJV) "And they began to be sorrowful, and to say unto him one by one, Is it I? and another said, Is it I?"

Here is an example of the fundamental principle of self examination. Can we picture the thirteen of them reclining around the meal table, one by one asking, "Is it I"? Each one was searching his own conscience, perhaps perplexed at the enormity of Jesus' suggestion, yet knowing that he was in earnest.

We do well to think about the fact that Judas was not deflected from his evil purpose, even though Jesus indicated to him that he knew that purpose. Is it possible we can be like that? Is it possible we can resolutely refuse to acknowledge that some intention we have is irreconcilable with the ways of God? Is it possible we might expect God to turn to good some evil we plan? Think upon Judas, and let us beware. It was too late when he realized what he had done.

The little group, now without Judas, sang a hymn, then set off across the Kidron valley to the Mount of Olives. This would be a stimulating evening walk down into the valley and up the northern side to the Mount. As they went, the disciples being completely oblivious to the danger ahead, Jesus confided to them that they would be offended because of him. Again they really did not understand, and Peter, quick to defend himself and his master, pledged his support.

(Mat 26:33 KJV) "Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended."

I wonder how many times we have made a similar commitment to Jesus, and then reneged? How many times in our personal morning prayer for example, have we pledged to be obedient, and to be as a beacon for the truth in this spiritually dark era, and then let slip opportunities to demonstrate that we meant what we said? Peter was foremost in this declaration of commitment, but the other disciples wholeheartedly supported his avowal. They had the very best intention. Jesus knew their hearts, that they were genuine, and he knew their weakness. At this time Jesus knew what was immediately ahead, his disciples still did not. They were out on an evening walk with their beloved

master, such as they would often take, after a fine repast, oblivious of the evil designs of Judas.

They came to Gethsemane. They had had a good meal and a stimulating hill walk ending in the garden of Gethsemane. It was now very late and they were no doubt pleasantly tired, although perhaps a little disturbed because Jesus was so unsettled. Jesus took Peter, James and John and went further into the garden to pray.

Usually Jesus went alone to pray; this time he needed company. He asked no more of them than that they watch. What happened? They fell asleep! Did Jesus get upset with them for this? In an hour of his great need they were unable to give him the emotional support he wanted to help him face the greatest ordeal of his life. Jesus roused them with stern words, but he was not angry.

(Mat. 26:40-41 KJV) "And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? {41} Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Jesus knew Peter. He knew why he had declared his commitment. He knew Peter did not at that time have the resources to follow through on his commitment. Jesus was trying to set the example. Peter, James and John could not overcome their weariness to follow him. Had they been mentally alongside Jesus as he prayed to his father, they might have received strength to overcome as Jesus received the courage to go on to the end. "Watch and pray... The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak". Is Jesus telling us that the flesh can be strengthened by earnest attention to prayer? Yes, he is. What we know about this incident is that Jesus, who was diligent in prayer, passed through his trial without regret. Peter, and James and John, all deserted him. It should make us think a lot about the power of prayer.

On a later occasion, James the Lord's Brother, this was not James the brother of John who was with them in the Garden, he was aware of the power of prayer.

(James 5:16-17 KJV) "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. {17} Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months."

Sometimes we find ourselves in the company of a brother or sister in great anguish for some reason, and we feel powerless to help. Would we sleep while they agonize? Would we not rather pray?

Jesus went away again.

- He sought comfort again from his Father.

- He was alone himself now.
- No thunder of approval from the heavens.
- No support from the three disciples.
- He came back to find them sleeping.
- He left them.
- He returned to prayer, to solicit the fortitude he needed.

With hindsight, we might feel we want to give those disciples a good shake, tell them to pay attention. Tell them they need the strength although they do not know it at this time. They do not have the leisure to sleep, as the end of an era, the Mosaic, draws rapidly to an end. They should get up and do something!

Now let us stand in their shoes.

- Are we sleeping, spiritually, when we should be praying?
- Do we know what challenges to our faith lie in the next few hours ahead as we approach the end of this age?
- Are we going to be able to face up to them, or will we fail?
- How much effort are we putting forth to establish our faith so that it will support our weak flesh in time of unanticipated need?
- If we fail, will we have opportunity for repentance?

We must prepare not to fail!

Jesus returned from his third session at prayer to find the disciples still sleeping. Soon the rabble came up the hill, stealthily perhaps, so as not to flush out their prey.

Jesus awoke the disciples just as Judas and his men arrived. Now what fear! Panic! Pandemonium! They drew a sword to defend their master.

Jesus had his composure, he was able to protect his captors from his disciples, but the disciples now reaped the rewards of their relaxation. They were in total disarray instead of able to face what they had been told would happen. They had not appreciated they were being forewarned, that they might be forearmed.

Peter, his mind no doubt reeling at this sudden turn of events, tracked down the hill, following his master and the rabble across the valley, into the city and up to the palace of the high priest. He seems to have gained entrance with a disciple who was known in the palace, Nicodemus perhaps?

Let us give Peter credit, he did follow his master into the palace, it does not appear any of the other ten did. Once there he did not do as well as he would have liked, but he was there. A damsel recognized that he had been with Jesus; he denied it. What would have happened if he had acknowledged her? We do not know, of course, but often when we face up to difficulties of this nature they melt away. Had Peter been engrossed in prayer with Jesus he might have had the courage to acknowledge his association, and it might have been passed off as a matter of little consequence to the damsel.

Perhaps his denial stirred her curiosity and she discussed the issue with another maid, who confirmed the first in her identification of Peter. If Peter had been fortified by prayer, he might have boldly affirmed his affiliation, and furthermore he could have told her that unpleasant though the whole situation was, it was according to prophecy.

But if you or I had been there, would we not have done as Peter did. Is it not true?

By now, those who stood by were convinced who Peter was, they told him his accent gave him away. Peter had a third opportunity to prove himself. Let us hope we always have three opportunities to prove ourselves, at least three! As soon as Peter had made the third denial he heard the cock crowing as day was about to dawn.

(Luke 22:61-62 KJV) "And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. {62}And Peter went out, and wept bitterly."

Let us put ourselves in Peter's place. We are in the palace, warming ourselves before the fire after a long night with only an hour or two of sleep.

Our defences are down because we are tired.

We do not understand why Jesus is not able to escape, or ravage his captors by the power of his conversation.

Someone might recognize that it is we who cut off the man's ear, and twice accusations have been made which came perilously close to revealing the truth.

Then the others around the fire charge us with association with the accused. How vehemently we deny, using words we did not know were in our vocabulary!

Then we hear above the clangour in the palace, the distant cock crowing, clearly heard, intensified by a tender conscience to a level to pierce the brain.

The captive Jesus, whom we love, has also heard, and turns to look at us.

- What a look!
- Not a look of reproach.
- Not disgust.
- No glance to say, "I told you so!"
- Not anger.
- It is a look of compassion, of sorrow, of love for us who have tried our very best but did not quite make it.
- We feel sick!
- The sick feeling wells up in our stomach, bolts up the windpipe and gives us heartburn like we can never remember. It chokes us.

- "He went out, and wept bitterly".
- Maybe it could all have gone differently had we been fortified by strong prayer.
- If only we had the opportunity to prepare again!
- That look from the Master!

No one has followed us out of the palace to arrest us. We seem to be quite safe, but now there would be some equity if we were arrested, if we were given another opportunity to defend our association with Jesus!

Peter recovered from his experience. Judas, who also denied Jesus, he committed suicide. Peter, he was well meaning, but inadequately prepared. He learned his lesson in the school of hard knocks as so many of us have to as well, when he could have been better prepared if he had paid attention to the words of Christ, and believed.

Of a later occasion is recorded:

(John 21:15 17 KJV) So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. {16} He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. {17} He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

Yes, Peter loved Jesus!

We have looked at several people this morning, Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter and ourselves. From each consideration we can learn.

Mary showed gentle intuition and selfless devotion, guided by her understanding because she had diligently attended to the words of Jesus, her great love, and the feminine ability to understand where others could not.

Judas is the epitome of selfishness and greed, expecting God to work things out according to his plan, rather than seeking to cooperate with God's way of doing things.

Peter is perhaps closest to our hearts because he is so like us in his willingness to commit, his inability to adequately prepare, and his remorse at failure, and his recovery from the depths of bitterness.

We have related ourselves to these folk from two millennia ago. Where do we stand now? What will we be doing next? Let us think about this as we associate with the emblems. Let us remember that the memorial feast which grew out of that Passover celebration is not for condemnation, although it can do that, but rather that we might once more renew our vows of allegiance to

the path in which Jesus walked, that we might take stock and review. Of course we will see Peter in our approach, we may see Judas in our attitude sometimes, let us hope we find Mary there! Whatever we see when we search our souls, let us not be discouraged, but remember as we take from the cup, that Jesus is there to help, to sympathise, to empathise, and to present us faultless before the Father. He died that we might be forgiven, let us make sure we do our little bit, and turn to him and to the Word.

(2006, MS)