

Wednesday of Holy Week 2015: John 13: 21-32 – Peter Cheshire

Reflection on Judas

In 1993, several years before I became a Christian, I was fascinated by, almost obsessed with a TV programme which I had on video and was therefore able to watch several times. It was a piece of anti-Christian polemic and I really wanted to come to understand not only the things that were said in the programme that I thought were true, but also a vague feeling that I had even then that the whole thing was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Christian beliefs. Curiously and paradoxically this programme, which was virulently hostile towards Christianity became a significant staging-post on my journey towards coming to accept the Christian faith.

The programme was called *Sorry, Judas* and was written and presented by the author Howard Jacobson. At the start of the programme he dresses himself up as a Jewish horror figure of the medieval imagination and thereafter, taking the role of Judas, he explores Judas' story bit by bit, showing at every turn how the figure of Judas was at the centre of the shameful anti-Semitism that gripped the church in the Middle Ages and beyond.

He points out that the name Judas is similar to the word Jew in every language. This is particularly the case in German where the words are Judas and Jude. Right at the start of the programme he says *I am entangled in the Christian story, because I am indispensable to it. For Jesus to rise again as a God he must be betrayed and sacrificed. I, Judas the Jew, minister to these sublime necessities and bear all the guilt for all the blood.*

In the rest of the programme we see this played out in extracts from early 20th Century films about the passion, medieval and renaissance paintings which depict Judas as the quintessential Jew and toe-curlingly anti-Semitic statements from Martin Luther and also from what I can only assume is an earlier and long replaced section from the Catholic catechism. Howard Jacobson's overall message is that anti-Semitism is an inevitable consequence of Christian doctrine and that the figure of Judas is at the very centre of this.

These are challenges which I think Christians cannot ignore. During the course of the programme we see extracts from a discussion involving a number of senior figures from the church along with a variety of Jewish commentators. In keeping with the style of the programme this is done as a mock-up of a painting of the last supper. The reactions of the churchmen are disappointingly muted. Dick France says that he never thought that Judas was that important a figure anyway. Hugh Montefiore says that Jesus simply picked a wrong'un and that's what happens when you pick a wrong'un. The most interesting response comes from the then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, who takes the view that Mike introduced us to

on Good Friday a few years ago, that Judas had misunderstood the nature of Jesus' role as Messiah and that his betrayal was an honest attempt to get things moving sooner rather than later.

I actually rather agree with Howard Jacobson that Judas is an essential figure, although not for the reasons that he gives. In John's account of Jesus' last week, here as elsewhere, Jesus seems completely in control. By dipping the bread and handing it to Judas he almost seems to be commissioning him to go out and betray him and we are left with the feeling that this betrayal is part of the process by which, as we hear at the end of this evening's passage, the Son of Man is glorified. The fact that the betrayal is not really necessary to the mechanics of the story as Jesus could have been identified and arrested at any time when he was preaching publically adds to the feeling that there is something essential in terms of its meaning. But what is it?

I think we can get closer to an answer to this question if we consider an aspect of Christian teaching which in my view Howard Jacobson has got completely wrong. Speaking as Judas he says *I am your delusion that wickedness is somewhere else*. Surely it is a central feature of Christianity that we acknowledge that wickedness is not somewhere else but right here among us and inside us.

To cast all wickedness on the shoulders of Judas is as misleading as the pointless question about whether the Jews or the Romans are chiefly to blame for Jesus' death. It diverts our attention away from our own sin and our own shortcomings and the realisation that, to quote a modern hymn, *ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers*.

Judas is a universal figure as are all the disciples. We can identify with them, sharing their small triumphs and greater disasters, their honest attempts to do the right thing and their frequent realisation that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. We know their squabbling, their devotion to status, their juxtaposition of boasting and failure. And Judas is very much a part of that. On Monday, Mike said how easy it would be for us to take Judas' worldly view of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with expensive oil, how easy it would be for us to be on Judas' side.

Judas is part of our world. His scheming, his avarice, his hypocrisy and dishonesty and his betrayal are all part of the world in which we live and move and have our being. It's this world, our world, which drives Jesus into the hands of his enemies. But it's also a world which we, like the disciples, through the sheer grace of God and by means of the death and resurrection of Jesus can be drawn out of and pointed towards heaven.