

Wednesday of Holy Week

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Introduction

This reading is one of the most challenging texts in scripture. We are brought face to face with guilt, personal choice, and sin, and with the function of a scapegoat. When Abraham takes Isaac to be sacrificed, he is doing the will of God, yet he is provided with a ram to take the place of his son. This substitution story has been long held as a metaphor within the Christian story of Holy Week: Jesus the sacrificial lamb is innocent, and this time the guilty children are ourselves – the glory of the messiah, revealed in his resurrection, necessitates his death. The closed logic of the theological reading supplied by the generations above our own has been frequently challenged by scholars, from Irenaeus in the second century CE, who held that Jesus' redemptive power was in the incarnation as much as in the resurrection, to writers like Wendell and Moltmann today. Reading the text, why not wonder about the introduction of Satan into the story? What is the role given to Judas? What is the balance for you in this text between unavoidable destiny and personal choice?

Text

John 13:21–32

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." 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 in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received 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 Man 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.

I find this text brings many questions to my mind. I can't help reading again and again the sentences about the piece of bread. 'So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.' Why does Jesus single out Judas in this way? Is there some understanding in Jesus' gift of the piece of bread that Judas is not free to escape his role as the person who gave Jesus up to the authorities? What is the function of that revealing of Judas' identity – as thief or as spy – to the disciples? There's confusion in the text: some people thought Judas was to buy things needed for the festival, but others, we might guess, thought Jesus was talking of the selling of his identity to the Roman soldiers.

What is the function of Judas' betrayal of Jesus' identity? Is it necessary to the crucifixion narrative? Was it preordained? Are these two revelations of identity, Jesus to the Romans, and Judas to the disciples, linked?

In her famous hymn, 'There is a green hill far away,' Cecil Frances Alexander writes of the theology of sacrificial substitution as she saw it.

'There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, and let us in.'

The world in which Cecil lived was one of a settled order of things. She was the daughter of a Major in the British army, a friend of John Keble, and a supporter of the Anglican reform known as the Oxford Movement. This was a movement to reshape the church towards their perception of the medieval church, bringing back or recreating forms of worship and architectural styles which they believed were more true to the church universal, or catholic church. This theological movement had a profound effect on the ecclesiastical buildings of the mid to late 19th century which can still be seen in churches today: the purposeful positioning of the altar as the focus of the church building, the highlighting again of the choir and of choir stalls, and a recreating of wooden furniture within some churches which had not been in place since the 16th century. In all this, the Oxford Movement followers had a strong sense of rectitude, of recreating or reconstituting a 'right' way to do things. Cecil's views on the theological placing of all things in their right place are also seen in her hymn 'All things Bright and Beautiful' in which she wrote the now rarely sung, verse;

'The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.'

Some of us might find it much easier to read the liberations within the writings of Christina Rossetti than the socially restrained views of Cecil Frances Alexander. Yet it cannot be denied that Alexander expressed the views of many Christians in her day, and still today there are Christians who share her view of the divine will of God dictating our places in society, our wealth, or even our health.

When we wrestle with the conflicts in the text between Jesus and Judas, we are forced to decide how far God 'ordered their estate'. Do we mean ordered, as in commanded it to be so? Or ordered in the sense of, put them in a ranking of priority? Either way, the life of Christ is to end on the cross, whereas Judas hangs himself in shame. One is resurrected, the other condemned. Is that as God wanted it to be? Do we have an understanding of a divine will that wants or does not want a particular human or historical outcome?

For Cecil, the ordering of the human beings in her world was a divine decision: it was the way things were supposed to be. Is that so for the writer of the gospel of John? Is he telling us what was meant to happen, or simply what had happened?

Response

Sing together 'There is a Green Hill far away' or listen to a recording of it. Think about or discuss the ordered logic of the verses and the core belief that Jesus' death was a sacrifice on our behalf. Is that a view you share? If not, why not? If so, why?

Prayer

God who dipped bread in the dish,
we come before you this evening
sorry for those whose identities we have revealed for the wrong reasons,
to hurt them, or make them ashamed.
We ask you to forgive us for any time in which we made someone a scapegoat or
singled them out, especially on an unfounded suspicion or a rumour.
Forgive us, for we are sorry.
Forgive us, for we shall try not to treat others in this way again,

Loving God who is love itself, we thank you for your forgiveness so freely given
and for the freedom we find in your love to be our better selves,

Amen