

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Wednesday, April 01, 2026
Wednesday In Holy Week

**Sermon followed by the Office of Tenebrae sung by
the Choir of Men and Boys**
5:30 pm

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A Sermon by
Professor Sarah Coakley

on
John 13:21-30

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Address 4: Betrayal

From 'The Journey of Desire: Passion, Temptation and Transformation'

‘...when [Jesus] had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas [and] Jesus said, “What you are going to do, do quickly”.

... So ... [Judas] went out; and it was night’ (John 13. 26, 27, 30)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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I spoke earlier this week of the embarrassing ‘excess’ of love and devotion that a woman showed Jesus as he stood at the threshold of his own Passion; and of how this strange and seemingly random event was used by Jesus to begin to lead us into the way of ecstatic divine love that only his Passion will fully reveal. For the love that was commended by Jesus in that woman, Mary, was already a love beyond worldly gift-exchange, a love (and indeed distress) beyond the *ordered* negotiation of rational give-and-take.

But tonight we confront, inversely, a different sort of distress, a distress and longing invested *in* control; and so we stand alongside that most problematic and tragic male character in the Passion story, Judas Iscariot. For tonight is Judas’s night, Judas who – in contrast to the excesses of a grieving woman, and like so many of us still – seemingly could not believe in an economy of Passion and glory *beyond* the world’s economy of exchange and order. Indeed perhaps the most revealing thing that the gospel of John has already told us of Judas, in Tuesday’s gospel, is that it was he, the trusted keeper of the disciples’ purse, who was the most truly affronted at Mary of Bethany’s excessive show of love and grief, her ‘wasting’ of 300 denarii’s worth of precious nard. Judas, then, was the one who kept his eyes on the balancing of books. Judas was the good planner; he knew what was ‘worth’ what, and how things should be ordered – he had *his* ‘order of desire’. Perhaps, as many biblical scholars have suggested, he even wanted to ‘order’ Jesus’s final victory in some supernatural way, by arranging a splendid dénouement with the High Priestly party by which Jesus would then be overtly established as Messiah, and decisively manifest his divine power? Was he trying to force Jesus’s hand in this way? I suspect so, but we can only guess.

None of the negative ascriptions that subsequently build in different strands of the New Testament against Judas, however, seems able to capture the full subtlety and strangeness of what the writer of

John's gospel *underlyingly* has to say about Judas tonight, and this goes deeper. For what we have here is the strange idea of a *necessary* betrayal, one that God, through his Son Jesus, not only allows, but makes a central part of His divine plan. And thus we must not carve a *disjunction* between our consideration of Judas tonight, and the matter of Jesus's own 'excessive' expression of love and communion in the foot-washing and distribution of bread, on which we focus tomorrow. For *in* this vital ch. 13 of John's gospel, where all this happens together, betrayal and love are inextricably entangled. Jesus washes *Judas's* feet, Jesus gives *Judas* the first 'morsel' of his precious food, note, and Jesus sends *Judas* out to do what he 'has to do'. It seems then that this terrible paradox of love and betrayal is an intrinsic part of the awful stuff of Passion: the Passion cannot start without Judas. He is the necessary hinge of it, where life and death, love and betrayal, intermingle and contend. This is indeed Judas's night.

So here we meet the difficult heart of the matter, and its most paradoxical and distressing twist. Judas, the betrayer, is actually *central to the plan of salvation*. But to understand this paradox better we have to notice that the word used for Judas as 'betrayer' (from the Greek verb *paradidōmi*) more accurately, or literally, means to 'hand over'. This verb, rather than the one that more strictly means 'betray' (*prodidōmi*) is the one invariably used of Judas in the New Testament (except only once and quite exceptionally, in the gospel of Luke). So that word play, that little linguistic pun between 'hand over' and 'betray', therefore, is present every time Judas is mentioned. It is actually 'handing over' Jesus that it is Judas's divinely-intended and necessary work to do. Jesus, *because of Judas*, becomes the one who can be 'handed over' to his own Passion.

And from here, as we enter the actual triduum tomorrow, we shall see that in this 'handed-over' state, Jesus is, as it were, made 'passive' to the world, and so manifests his love in a new and final way: only thus can he enter into his 'glory'. Now, in his Passion, he will speak little, whereas before he taught much; now he will do no miracles, whereas before, marvels attended him; now he will despair in the garden, whereas before he triumphed; now he will be mocked and despised, whereas before he was adulated. Now he will die, whereas before he brought others back to life. Jesus is being *constrained* into a new posture of pure, passive love, and all this will unfold as a result of Judas's necessary act of 'handing [him] over'.

And so, as we ask what this paradox means for us, now, tonight, we see that the Judas question cuts deep into the heart of the problem of our own 'uncleannesses' (Jesus's word) as we approach the Passion – of our own experiences of betraying as well as of being betrayed. Can human betrayals and true (divine) love really intersect? More troublingly, if it was necessary that Jesus be 'handed over', if being handed over in this way is of the essence of Jesus's love and Passion, then why must Judas suffer for it? Why must he be betrayed as the betrayer, when what he did in 'handing over' Jesus was what he 'had to do' for the sake of the very unfolding of the 'glory' of that divine love?

Let me leave you tonight with an early Christian image that most poignantly expresses this profound theological problem, but also gestures at a way through it, painful as it is. This little piece of art-work focuses on the tradition found in the gospel of Matthew, that after the betrayal and arrest, Judas, in terrible anguish and remorse, having failed to bring about what he wanted, went out and hanged himself. A fifth century artist carves Judas's tragedy thus, delicately on the lid of an ivory casket, now in the British Museum. Two men hang on trees: one is Jesus, stripped on the cross, gazing outwards, dying of love; the other is Judas, suspended from his own tree, dying of despair and shame. What the arrangement of the figures seems to tell us is that Judas's suicide, his *despair* of God's mercy, was *his* final tragedy – not his 'handing over' of Jesus as such.

For if betrayal is so deep a part of human sin, and so profoundly entangled also with the story of divine love and salvation, then it cannot actually be betrayal *as such* that must be repressed or damned through the Passion. Rather, what is held up to us is the amazing possibility that even betraying, as well as *being* betrayed, can become part of the terrible stuff of being ‘handed over’ to the fullest and deepest meaning of Christian love. All human betrayal is indeed terrible, often seemingly unforgiveable. But God can make love, excessive love, even out of human betrayal. On this view Judas’s tragedy was that – unlike Peter – he despaired of that possibility; he could not conceive of that excessive sort of forgiveness. (And indeed who knows but that God may not have still forgiven him after death? I cannot myself believe that divine love does not extend to the unbearable agony of any suicide.)

Here then tonight is Judas, the balancer of the books, the ‘hander over’ of Christ to his Passion, the tragic man of despair. Look on him. For this is Judas’s night. And so it is also our night, the night of our misplaced desires for control, the night of our betrayals, the night of our misguided despair of mercy, which only God’s Son can cure and heal.

‘And Jesus said “What you are going to do, do quickly ...” And Judas went out and, it was night’. So now we go into the darkness with him.

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With grateful acknowledgement of my debt to Bill Vanstone’s *The Stature of Waiting* (London, DLT, 1982), and the profound analysis there of the meaning of Jesus’s being ‘handed over’ to his Passion.
