

Judas: Ecclesiastes 5:10-15 & Luke 22:1-6

Well, it's not been a bad week for the jobless figures has it? But never the less, there are a lot of people still looking for work and about a fortnight ago I did hear about a job which was being advertised – however, although the employer had submitted an advert to her local Job centre it had been rejected. What was the problem? Well, this potential employer had specified that the ideal candidate would be someone who was “reliable” and (can you believe it?) she was told that she couldn't say this because it was “prejudicial towards people who were unreliable”. No, seriously!

Political correctness aside, the reality is that no-one wants an unreliable team member working for them, but as we begin by looking at Judas as the first of our characters who played a key role at or around the Cross of Christ, we seem to have hit upon the archetypal unreliable employee. But actually, can I tell you, it's much more serious than that. So, let's look a little more closely at who Judas was, what drove him and perhaps we might find a little of this unreliable character in ourselves.

Now, Judas is known in the Gospels as “Judas Iscariot” a title which means “a man of Kerioth” a place which is in Moab, it means that of the twelve disciples Judas was the outsider from day one, the only member of the inner circle who was not a Galilean.

Now, of course, that always makes life a little bit more difficult; your accent is different, you aren't familiar with the customs and stories of the others and let's be honest, some of the other disciples were a fairly rough, hands-on bunch. Judas Iscariot may have found it difficult at times to feel part of the group and we could excuse him a little self-pity except that Jesus neither saw him nor treated him as an outsider - ever.

Perhaps it might surprise you to learn that when Jesus addressed Judas the terms he used included both “friend” and “comrade”. In fact at the last supper Judas appears to be sat on the left of Jesus which, because it was traditional to recline on couches, was actually the place of honour – the person on the right of the host would have their back to them.

Judas was also given a job of no little responsibility – he was the treasurer for Jesus and the disciples; he had responsibility for the common purse. In fact, bearing in mind that the Gospels were written after Judas’ true nature had been revealed, when you read them you might be a little surprised at how Judas is spoken of by the other disciples.

For example, when you read through the lists of apostles in the New Testament they always end with “Judas Iscariot who was to betray him”, it seems like a pretty strong condemnation, but actually the Greek word simply means “to hand over” which is how it is translated every other time it crops up. True, Judas did betray Jesus, but his ex-Christian brothers were a little more charitable than perhaps the Bible translators have been.

So was Judas just a good guy who has been misunderstood? Ahh, no. Judas certainly did have a problem which he allowed to drive him to betray Jesus and that problem was that he was materialist; he idolised money.

Do you remember how Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that “no-one can serve two masters”? Jesus explained, “Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will love the one and despise the other.” Before summing up the problem by declaring, “You cannot serve both God and money”! Well, here in Judas we see the ultimate example of that dilemma and to us; the ultimate warning.

You know, there are lots of theories about Judas' motivation, even this evening Gerry Adams from Sin Fein will tell a Channel 4 Programme that Judas was turned informer by the Roman security services just as many of his former comrades in the Republican movement were induced to spy, but it's a lot simpler than that – Judas simply loved money.

A few years ago when the sit-com Father Ted appeared, the long running subtext was that the priest Father Ted Crilly had been banished to Craggy Island after financial irregularities cropped up; "The money was only resting in my account!" was his constant if rather weak defence. Well, Judas had his hand in the till too.

Not only did Judas look after the common purse, but John tells us in chapter 12:6 that he used to help himself to what was put in to it. There's no sense of scape-goating here, it is only mentioned because Judas is the disciple who objects most strongly to Mary anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume.

John gives us the context for Judas' unhappiness; that here was a missed opportunity for him to cream off a substantial amount of cash, it's not that Judas cared that much about the poor at all.

So, see how Judas' worship of money is starting to dominate his life; think back a few weeks to when we considered what the book of Proverbs taught us about addictions and you can see how, just as those addictions devour our attention and time as well as diverting our resources, so too does the addiction to money and materialism.

And, truth be told, we are not so far removed from Judas when we refuse to be churches who give to mission, arguing that charity begins at home.

Or as Christians who will spend more on a lunch out in town than we will be prepared to put in the collection plate. What is our motivation, there? I'm afraid that it is materialism and the love of money.

Well, I suspect that you are a little offended that I have said that to you, I would certainly be offended if I were sat where you are, but don't worry; I experience the guilt and flush of anger at what I have written when I am sat at home in front of the computer and I am more than happy to agree with you later how crass, insensitive and unrealistic the preacher is. The trouble is, I also know that God uses me to convict me with devastating honesty, how about you?

You see, there is always a good reason to be materialistic, it's hard to fault Judas' argument that the perfume used by Mary which was worth a working man's annual wage could have been sold and used to great effect amongst the poor; "Look what we could have done with £20,000! Think of it; Haiti, St. Theresa's', Christian Aid, the Leprosy Mission - £5,000 each, or just a lump sum to one and it has all been wasted by pouring it on Jesus' feet!"

It's a brilliant argument, it would have got the disciples thinking highly of him because they certainly trusted him enough right through until end with the common purse. Perhaps Judas even fooled himself while he said it, but in his heart his motives were not focused on the poor, but simply on himself.

Sometimes our materialism masquerades as noble ideals, providing for own church; its roof, it's toilet facilities or its boiler, maybe our families, our spouse or even ourselves in retirement, but all the while turning our attention away from God. I have a horrible suspicion that if I want to be able to retire I should immediately quit what I'm doing and move into another better paid profession.

Good for me and my family; quite rational and sensible, but it would be at the cost of ignoring God's call and placing money on the throne of my life, which when you consider means ejecting God from there, ceases to be rational and sensible at all.

So do you see how easy it is to be enslaved by materialism? Both Luke and John tell us that when Judas decided to hand Jesus over, that's when Satan entered into him. Yes, someone would be responsible for handing Jesus over to an unjust death, but Judas wasn't helplessly carried along by fate, he chose his master, he chose whom to serve and once he had ejected God from the throne of his life, Satan moved into the vacant place.

There is a worrying statistic that in the recession more and more people are turning to gambling to meet their financial needs, becoming enslaved to debt because they need a way to make money and feed our society's craving for stuff; did you know that over the past 30 years the space occupied by our possessions has doubled and the value of those possessions has increased 133% – that means 44% of your house is taken up with stuff and that stuff needs to be paid for.

Have you put stuff and the need to pay for stuff in the top spot in your life? Have you chosen to serve materialism by whatever means possible so that you can maintain your standard of living? Well, if you have beware, the writer of Ecclesiastes says "Whoever loves money never has money enough, whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income." And learn from Judas.

You see, where did all this lead Judas? It led him to the chief priests. Maybe he justified it to himself that he was trying to force Jesus' hand – there's no evidence for that, but materialism, as we have seen, is very clever at covering its tracks – maybe he just wanted the money that he was offered.

And there is some debate about how much the thirty pieces of silver were worth, perhaps as much as six month's wages, perhaps as little as just one, certainly nowhere near the cost of the perfume Mary had so lovingly poured onto Jesus' feet as an act of worship and as Jesus had said; preparation for his burial.

And having been paid to turn traitor Judas then looked for the time and the place to betray Jesus and it came at night in the private garden of Gethsemane outside the city where Jesus prepared for what he knew was to come; as we just sang in that lovely new hymn;

“To see the king of heaven fall
In anguish to his knees,
The light and hope of all the world
Now overwhelmed with grief.
What nameless horrors must he see,
To cry out in the garden:
‘Oh take this cup away from me-
Yet not my will but yours’”
And it is Judas, who for a few silver coins would hand Jesus over to the fate of the Cross.

Well, is that where the story ends? Not quite, you see Judas is not the most evil person in the world, but he is perhaps one of the most tragic.

In many ways he is not dissimilar to many of us; his self-interests have got the better of him and when it becomes clear that Jesus is headed for crucifixion he realises what he has done. G.K. Chesterton said that “to be clever enough to get a great deal of money, one must be stupid enough to want it.” And Matthew tells us in chapter 27 that Judas realises how stupid he has been, he is “seized with remorse”.

So Judas returns to the chief priests and tells them plainly, “I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood.”

And he tries to break the deal he made with them, but this is not like my new broadband agreement; there is no 14 day cooling off period. For Judas there is no way back. In desperation he throws the money back into the temple and out of his hands and then he flees.

And, do you know what? Then comes the most tragic part of Judas' life – his death. Judas has done two incredibly brave and honourable things; he has admitted his sin against Jesus and done so publicly and then he has repented; he has dramatically made a decision to reject his old materialistic life, but he can see no future hope, no forgiveness, no grace. Matthew records that Judas left the temple and hanged himself and Acts gruesome account seems to indicate that when Judas' body was cut down, or finally fell to the ground, it was seriously decomposed.

But what is most tragic about this is that Judas sees no possibility of forgiveness or grace because he kills himself before the cross and before Jesus' resurrection. For Judas despite his confession and repentance there is still no hope for him, how absolutely devastating it is to know that he dies without understanding the wonder and glory of the cross of Christ.

You see, at the heart of this is the difference between Jesus and Judas. Jesus reached out to Judas, drew him into the twelve, gave him a position of responsibility, cared for him, served him, honoured him and even at the moment of betrayal called him "friend", just the way Jesus treats all sinners.

But in contrast Judas never calls Jesus "Lord", the best he ever manages is the formal title, "Rabbi", "teacher". Judas' Lord is money and you cannot serve two masters; God and money - one will always win over the other. So, honestly, who is Lord in your life?

As we begin this season of Lent and approach the Cross this Easter, let me ask you; do you truly know the wonders of God's grace and forgiveness, or is Jesus just a good teacher to you? Is your god your wage packet, or your credit card limit, your HD TV or your windows 7 PC? Perhaps it is your house or your car? But as the first bishop of Liverpool J. C. Ryle said, "Nothing, I am sure has such a tendency to quench the fire of religion as the possession of money." And Judas discovered none of those material things can ultimately save you.

No if there is one thing that we learn from Judas it is that the cross of Christ and the empty tomb are worth far more than any amount of money and all you need to do is to acknowledge your sin and repent and then declare Jesus to be, not your teacher, but your Lord and your Saviour, because Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins and then he rose again to open up for us the real hope of forgiveness and the promise, not of condemnation, despair and death, but through faith in him; God's amazing grace and the gift of eternal life. Amen.