

“BETRAYING JESUS”
Mark 14:43-52

There are no safe bets in the FA Cup – as Exeter City proved last Saturday, along with one or two other lesser giant killers – but I wouldn't be at all surprised if at the fourth round encounter between Portsmouth and Southampton there are a few cries (and maybe a few banners) which link Harry Redknapp with one of the characters in this morning's passage. For those of you who try to remain aloof from the seedy world that is professional football, I should explain that Harry Redknapp was the much loved and respected manager of Portsmouth and resigned towards the end of last year, claiming that he needed a rest from football for a bit and saying that whatever else he did, he wouldn't be going up the road to Pompey's deadliest rivals, Southampton. A fortnight later, he did; and Pompey fans saw it as a huge betrayal. Redknapp is now indisputably their Judas figure.

Judas Iscariot – the source of countless references to betrayal down through the ages, from defecting spies to political turncoats and errant football managers. And here's the root of it all. Jesus at his moment of destiny is turned in to the authorities by one of his closest associates. The Jewish establishment have been desperate to get their hands on Jesus since almost the beginning of his ministry. Right back in chapter three of Mark's story we read that the Pharisees and Herodians formed an unlikely alliance to plot some way of killing Jesus (3:6) and they've been gunning for him ever since. Now they get their chance and it comes through the willing assistance of one of the disciples, one of Jesus' close-knit group of travelling followers.

Mark goes out of his way, it seems, to emphasise just how great a betrayal it was. He emphasises at the very beginning of this passage that Judas was “*one of the Twelve*”. Just in case anyone had forgotten, we are talking here about a disciple, someone who had given up a great deal for Jesus, who was obviously committed to him. He then calls him “*the betrayer*” in v44. And he highlights the method of betrayal – the kiss. Now, it could be argued that this is the usual expression of greeting, especially of a rabbi by his disciple. In itself there is nothing too unusual in this way of greeting Jesus. But Mark uses a word here that intensifies the action – in Greek he has put *κατα* in front of the verb, which is a way of emphasising what is being done – so we might translate it as “*he gave him a really good kiss*”. And that was the signal for the group of soldiers and officials to move in on him in the darkness amongst the many bivouacking Passover pilgrims who would very likely have been on the slopes of the Mount of Olives that night.

What was Judas's motive, though? Why did he do it? That's a question that has exercised the minds of thinkers and scholars down through the centuries. A great deal of time and energy and ink and passionate

debate have been expended on that question. Did he do it just for the money? After all, he showed on more than one occasion that he could be fairly mercenary in his thinking. Was he jealous of Jesus' popularity or of his power? Did he perhaps harbour a grudge against Jesus because he wasn't in the very inner circle, or because Jesus didn't offer him any favours? There's a strongly held view amongst some scholars that Judas was really trying to force Jesus' hand. He was manoeuvring Jesus into a situation where he would have to do something powerful and demonstrate the truth or otherwise of his implicit claim to be Messiah. If he was, it probably didn't work out quite the way he expected!

The answer is, of course, that we don't know. It could have been any of those things – or a combination of them, or something completely different. We could ask if Judas himself was really aware of what he was doing. He could surely have had no idea of the cosmic significance of his actions. But what we do know, because Luke tells us in his story of Jesus, is that Judas was being used by the Devil (*Luke 22:3*). However laudable Judas's aims might possibly have been, the forces of evil were trying to benefit from the situation. Once again, though, although the Devil succeeded in his short-term objective, in the end he made possible God's overall plan of salvation for all humankind.

It has to be said, though, that the other disciples did not exactly come out of this episode covered in glory. With one exception (Peter, according to John's account – *John 18:10*), who took some highly inappropriate action, the others seem to have stood and watched, no doubt surprised and scared by what they saw going on in front of them. And then all of them – and again Mark uses an emphatic form: “*every single one of them*” – ran off, leaving Jesus to his fate. There's even this little cameo at the end of the passage about the one who was so desperate to run away that he left his coat in the soldier's hands and ran off naked. Possibly it was John Mark himself, the author of this book.

But through it all Jesus remains in control of the situation. He faces his destiny with dignity, rebuking his captors for their show of force and pointing out that they've had plenty of opportunities to get him in the past few days. He also clearly recognises that this is God's will, the climax of his plan of salvation for humanity, as he says, “*The Scriptures must be fulfilled.*” The words of the Hebrew prophets are now incontrovertibly coming to pass. This is all part of the establishing of God's kingdom. The final pieces are falling into place.

But this shows us, doesn't it, just how easy it is for us to end up betraying Jesus. Here was Judas, one of the chosen few – remember, Jesus chose him: he didn't volunteer to be a disciple in order to infiltrate the organisation – here's Judas turning against the man with whom he has spent the last three years, from whom he has learned so much, in whom he has invested so much time and energy. In the very act of devotion to him he has found himself giving Jesus' enemies the opportunity to try and defeat him. And

here we are, for all kinds of reasons we don't understand, with all kinds of mixed motives and sinful, human weaknesses, falling into the trap of betraying him again and again.

The very Devil himself gets into us, amongst us, uses us, subverts us if we are not careful to watch and pray. Despite our shows of devotion, our public acts of worship, our energy and resources spent on behalf of his church, we can end up effectively negating his work in our own lives and the lives of others. In fact, it is often actually in those very acts of worship and service that we fall down. We have our own, often misunderstood and misdirected motives for doing things, but so easily end up gossiping, bullying, being resentful and bitter, living according to worldly values. Maybe we feel, as Judas may have done, that we want to move things along a certain path – for the very best of reasons – but it ends up spoiling what Jesus really wants. Maybe we are trying hard to preserve something – for the very best of reasons – that Jesus wants changed.

Or maybe, like those other disciples, we stand by and watch others doing it all and refuse to get involved. We run away, or like Peter, take inappropriate action. We may be so taken aback by the actions of those we consider to be close to Jesus that we end up letting the Devil have his way, when we should be praying, speaking, acting. And once the Devil starts to get in amongst us, there's the potential for all hell to break loose.

Jesus doesn't actually need defending. He's well able to look out for himself. He continues to retain control of his situation. But, as we saw last time, he does expect our support, he does want us to be loyal to him. And the words we need to hear from him again and again are the words he spoke to those sleepy followers of his in the passage we considered last time – “*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation*” (v38). We love Jesus, as I'm sure Judas did deep down. So let us do all that we can to ensure that we do not let him down, that we do not negate his work by our own mixed and misunderstood motivations. Keep praying. And keep reflecting on what you are doing and why.