

“At A Distance” ~ Wednesday in Holy Week ~ “Spy Wednesday”

Greetings Saints and here we are on Wednesday in Holy Week. Today is a very interesting day liturgically in that really not much “officially” happens today with ceremony or liturgy in most of the Christian churches. In our Book of Common Prayer, there is not a liturgy or even a prayer for Wednesday in Holy Week. It has taken on the role of a “liturgical breather,” stationed between the expectation and frenzy of Palm Sunday and the relatively subdued environment in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday. Disciples prepared and gathered for the traditional Passover meal. Historically though, there is a lot going on. Let’s have a look.



On Wednesday evening at sunset, the Jewish feast of Passover officially begins. For Jews everywhere this is a day of Redemption; a day when salvation was gifted to the faithful, by way of some drops of lambs’ blood on the door post. The Angel of God was coming to wreak havoc, death and destruction on the unfaithful, and the Blood of the Lamb sealed the salvation of the believers and their families. An Old Testament story, dripping with New Testament images, symbolism and theology.

Back in 1st Century Jerusalem, there was a lot going on Wednesday with Jesus’ disciples. The disciples had been tasked to find a place to hold the Passover meal. Jesus and his Disciples were visitors, like many who had swollen the population of Jerusalem on this “holiday week.” Celebratory spaces were in short supply and especially on such short notice.

A lot had happened since Sunday, so let’s get caught up. On Monday, Jesus enters the Temple and physically dismantles the space singlehandedly. The traditional stories say that Jesus “made a whip of cords” and overturned tables and violently expelled out the animal sellers and money changers. On Tuesday, Jesus theologically takes on the Temple High Priest, the Temple Priests, the Sanhedrin Council, the Sadducees and the followers of the Temple Cult in a spirited

“all day debate” in the Temple. All of these very public, visible and very “in your face” activities contribute to the ever-building case of “Jesus as trouble-maker;” someone who will have to be dealt with sooner rather than later, by both the Jewish religious elite and the Romans. On Wednesday, Jesus is recovering from his dramatic actions in the Temple... quietly, several miles out of town in Bethany. Jesus had been invited to stay at the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany, and that is where we find Jesus today. Today is also the day when Jesus’ feet are anointed by the Woman, with the expensive oils and salves as we hear about so often in the classic re-telling of the story.

However, Wednesday is also a day when the focus shifts briefly but importantly to Judas with Wednesday in Holy Week being named dubiously for Judas as “Spy Wednesday.” As it is thought that it was today that Judas “hatched the plot” to betray Jesus to the Sanhedrin Council.

There is an old Simon and Garfunkel song from the ‘70’s that says, “One man’s ceiling is another man’s floor...” On the surface, the song is about the structure of the multitude of New York apartments, but a deeper more symbolic meaning emerges as the song evolves. Indeed, perspective is everything... context becomes an interpretative necessity if we are to understand where “people are coming from” when they are telling, or in the case of New Testament tradition, re-telling a story. One person’s hero is another one’s villain. One side’s patriot is the other side’s traitor. One religion’s believer is another religion’s heretic. And so it goes... so who and what was Judas... Christian traitor or Jewish “whistleblower?” Money-loving opportunist (synoptic Gospel authors), demonically-infused demon (Gospel of John), disillusioned zealot (various historians), or someone else’s “true believer?”

“The truth is we don’t know why Judas did what he did,” notes historian and author Dr. Joyce Cargill. “There are some very possible and very interesting, historically-based hypotheses. The grand irony, of course, is that without Judas’s betrayal, Jesus doesn’t get handed over to the Romans and crucified. Without Judas, you don’t have the central component of Christianity, the death and resurrection of Jesus.”

Several competing hypotheses dominate both the historical and Christian literature around Judas’ motivation for his actions. Let’s have a look.

Hypothesis #1 – Judas as Evil Betrayer: The most prevalent of Judas’ motivations in the Christian Gospels is Judas’ love of money and his moral devolution throughout the Gospels from beloved disciple, to money-hungry embezzler, to betrayer and traitor, to devil himself. It seems that with each next telling of the Gospels chronologically from Mark thru John, that Judas gets worse and worse with each subsequently composed text. It is also ironic that with each telling, Pilate gets “better and better.” More likable as we proceed from the Romans, killed Jesus (Mark) to the Jews killed Jesus (John). At the writing of the Gospel of John in 90 CE, Christianity was less and less a subset of Judaism, and more and more being seen as a separate and distinct religion. So, with each passing decade, Judas gets nastier and nastier until in John’s gospel Judas is actually demonically possessed.

Hypothesis #2: Judas as Zealot: Another explanation, say historians, is that Judas was disillusioned when Jesus did not measure up to the common Jewish conception of the Messiah as a revolutionary warrior who would overthrow Roman power and reestablish the Kingdom of David. Judas may have been a member of the Zealot Party or at least influenced by them in this regard. Zealots are seldom interested in hearing of their own need for personal healing and repentance, let alone the call to love their enemies.

Hypothesis #3: Judas as “Whistleblowing Jewish Traditionalist”: A third hypothesis is that Judas was thinking that perhaps Jesus’ reformation of traditional Judaism was going “too far-too fast” and was having “second thoughts.” Jesus’ teachings were becoming too radical a departure from what was being taught in the Temple and the synagogues of the day, for what Judas new and understood to be true. Like all the other Disciples, Judas was a Jew and for Judas it was increasingly difficult to see the ongoing Jewishness in Jesus’ spiritual reformation of Judaism. Judas knew and followed the “historical Jesus;” the apocalyptic Galilean preacher and social activist. But what was Jesus’ new way of thinking doing to Judas’ old way of knowing?

This third hypothesis is for me the most interesting one of all. It is postulated by New Testament and Early Church historian, Dr. Bart Ehrman. In this hypothesis, Dr. Ehrman asks, “What information did Judas possibly have about Jesus that, if disclosed, would seal the need for Jesus’ death immediately for both the Jews and the Romans?” Dr. Ehrman postulates that historically it is very unlikely that Jesus ever advertised himself as Messiah, Son of Man, or Son of God publicly. However, it was quite likely that in the privacy of quiet moments with his followers, that Jesus admitted to all three! This private claim to being not only the Jewish Messiah, but to also be the apocalyptic “Son of Man” and to claim divine “being-ship,” was precisely the explosive piece of information that the High Priest, the Temple Priests, the Sanhedrin Council, the Sadducees and the Romans needed to judge and execute the “revolutionary” and troublesome Jesus.

Judas “betrayal” wasn’t simply that Judas knew Jesus’ location and brought authorities to the Garden of Gethsemane. If they wanted to know where Jesus was, the authorities would have simply had him followed. No, it was Jesus’ private acknowledgement to his disciples of his role as Messiah, Son of Man and Divine Being... that was the blockbuster and game changer now public knowledge in the hands of his enemies, that got Jesus killed. That claim forever historically acknowledged either in sarcasm or in truth on Jesus’ Cross... Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. For the Jews, Jesus’ claim as Messiah infuriated the Jewish Temple establishment and threatened their leadership roles. For the Romans, Jesus’ claim as Messiah was a threat to the established political order, and Jesus’ claim to be a “divine being” was heretical. The Romans knew who their “gods” were... Zeus, Mars and Emperor Cesar Augustus whose image and pronouncement of his deity was on the very coins that Judas received.

So why did Judas tell? Regrettably, we will probably never know. Betrayer, Zealot, Whistleblower? You decide. Which theory is correct? We will never, never know. However, what

we do know is that Judas was one of the most explosive catalysts in history, transforming the historical Jesus within the span of 60 years, from the apocalyptic Galilean preacher, from being a footnote in 1st Century Jewish history to the founder of one of the worlds great religions and recognition by Christians around the world... as "Son of God and Lord of Lords."

See you Thursday... Blessings Father Joe

Image: 1325 oil by Uglino DiNerio