

Judas

Fifth Sunday of Lent Year C

John 12:1-8

I think John, the author of today's gospel, was feeling rather edgy about what Judas had said. You see I think that John, deep down, thought that Judas was right. And many of us might feel that what Judas had just said was perfect common-sense, the kind of thing that any well-meaning person could say now:

'why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?

John 12:5

We know deep down John senses this because, immediately after he has reported Judas's words, he makes a deliberate point of discrediting him. John writes

Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purpose and used to steal what was put into it.

If the other Gospel writers knew this, they don't tell us. Perhaps because they don't report these words of Judas about helping the poor they have no need to discredit him.

So what do you think? Should Mary have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor? Was she wrong to have anointed Jesus's feet with it?

There will be many people who will agree with Judas. There are people who will agree as a matter of spirituality and personal morality. There will be others who will agree as a matter of political priorities. I remember forty years ago, in a previous period of austerity, my great aunt complaining about the borough council wasting money by planting roundabouts with flower beds. And there are many now who claim that the Christian church should sell all its beautiful objects and use the money raised for socially responsible projects.

They are wrong. Judas was wrong. And I would like to say why.

It's all about budgeting. It's all about accountancy. And it's about spirituality - the three things very closely related. We don't know where Mary got the ointment from. But let's assume that she bought it with her own money. And it's a basic principle of human life that if you buy one thing with your money then you give up the opportunity to buy another. If you buy a pound of apples you can't buy a pound of pears as well. If I take a holiday in Benidorm I can't go to Torremolinos as well. So what did Mary forego in order to buy this ointment? I don't know. You don't know. There is no reason to suppose that John the gospel writer knows. But Judas thought he did know. That in itself was an assumption and an arrogant assumption. And the assumption Judas made was that in order to buy this very expensive appointment ointments Mary had cut her budget for giving to the poor. I think this tells us more about Judas than it does about Mary. I think it tells us that that is what Judas would have done. Or perhaps Judas is just trying to get one over on Mary by appearing to be morally superior.

Let me give you an alternative interpretation of this scenario. Mary bought this appointment by scrimping and saving. When she could have bought a nice cut of lamb she bought a cheap one; when she might of opened a good quality bottle of wine, she drank water. When she could have hired a donkey to pay a visit to a neighbouring town, she walked. And bit by bit she was able to gather together the money to buy the ointment to as a gift for Jesus

Now I don't know that my interpretation is correct. I don't know that Judas was wrong. But I do know that Judas was making an assumption that he had no right to make.

So how does this debate express itself in Pudsey in 2019? How does it express itself in her own personal lives? how does he express it self in the politics of Britain?

Let's begin with personal morality and spirituality. What Mary did was an act of love. She gave a gift to Jesus of a valuable ointment, and her time. We also offer Jesus our time in worship. And some would say it would be a better use of our time if we visited a sick relative and a better use of our money if we contributed to Christian aid. And if we are here instead of

visiting the sick the criticism would be justified. In fact Jesus made exactly this criticism of the Pharisees.

But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban' (that is, an offering to God - then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother.

Mark 7:11-12

And if we do that it is wrong. If I worship God in church instead of serving him in those who are poor and needy I have miss read the gospel. The old Testament prophets were continually making this point to the Jewish leaders, who were hot on liturgical niceties but pretty cool on social justice. The prophet Joel put it pretty pithily:

Rend your hearts not your garments.

Joel 2:13

Better there is a wider point here about who we are as human beings, about our very nature. Let us think about public spending. Roughly speaking about a quarter of all income tax that we pay goes to the health service. I guess that is as it should be. Physical and mental health is a basic human need. But we need more than that. We need beauty. That in the end is why we have flowers on roundabouts. we need a sense of community, we need to be able to relate to someone beyond ourselves, we need God. Medical technology is such that we could spend not only all taxation but the whole of our national income on healthcare. But there would be no humanity in that. And the health service recognises that. I visit quite a few hospitals and care homes for various reasons. The ones that make a good impression on me are those where the staff care enough about their environment to make sure there are attractive pictures on the wall. But it goes further than this. In recent years have seen an increased tendency to make hospital buildings attractive in their own right. I have walked into many modern hospitals with a soaring atrium that resembles a cathedral. But of course in recovering the value of beautiful buildings we have simply recovered what the Victorians knew. You have only got to walk into the old wing of the Leeds general infirmary to see that. Functional, box like buildings would be cheaper. Cheaper buildings would allow the health service to employ more doctors and nurses. But those who plan hospitals have worked out that in order to throw human beings need beauty.

These principles fit their way into the life of this church. I want to draw your attention to them. First we give one tenth of our unrestricted income to support mission. And we do not cut that back if we want to buy something beautiful for church. Second, we have over the last few years made considerable changes to this building to make it more useful. But being useful has not, I believe, been done at the cost of being beautiful. Those who planned this building consciously gave us a beautiful space for worship. I believe it is important we do not lose that.

So Judas was wrong in so many ways. He was wrong to suppose that those who spend their money on extravagant gifts do so at the cost of the poor rather than their own comfort. He was wrong to suppose that there must always be a stark choice between helping the poor and buying beautiful gifts. He was wrong to suppose that where there is a choice between beauty and practical help, the latter must always be preferred.

He was also wrong to steal from the common purse - but that was the least of his mistakes.

N Clews

7th April 2019