



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 18 October 2006

Judas Iscariot and Matthias

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, concluding our walk through the portrait gallery of the Apostles called directly by Jesus during his earthly life, we cannot fail to mention the one who has always been named last in the list of the Twelve: Judas Iscariot. We want to associate him with the person who is later elected to substitute him, Matthias.

Already the very name of Judas raises among Christians an instinctive reaction of criticism and condemnation.

The meaning of the name "Judas" is controversial: the more common explanation considers him as a "man from Kerioth", referring to his village of origin situated near Hebron and mentioned twice in Sacred Scripture (cf. Gn 15: 25; Am 2: 2). Others interpret it as a variant of the term "hired assassin", as if to allude to a warrior armed with a dagger, in Latin, *sica*.

Lastly, there are those who see in the label a simple inscription of a Hebrew-Aramaic root meaning: "the one who is to hand him over". This designation is found twice in the Gospel: after Peter's confession of faith (cf. Jn 6: 71), and then in the course of the anointing at Bethany (cf. Jn 12: 4).

Another passage shows that the betrayal was underway, saying: "he who betrayed him"; and also

during the Last Supper, after the announcement of the betrayal (cf. Mt 26: 25), and then at the moment of Jesus' arrest (cf. Mt 26: 46, 48; Jn 18: 2, 5). Rather, the lists of the Twelve recalls the fact of the betrayal as already fulfilled: "Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him", says Mark (3: 19); Matthew (10: 4) and Luke (6: 16) have equivalent formulas.

The betrayal itself happens in two moments: before all, in the planning, when Judas agreed with Jesus' enemies to 30 pieces of silver (cf. Mt 26: 14-16), and then, in its execution, with the kiss given to the Master in Gethsemane (cf. Mt 26: 46-50).

In any case, the Evangelists insist on the status as an Apostle that Judas held in all regards: he is repeatedly called "one of the twelve" (Mt 26: 14, 47; Mk 14: 10, 20; Jn 6: 71) or "of the number of the twelve" (Lk 22: 3).

Moreover, on two occasions, Jesus, addressing the Apostles and speaking precisely of Judas, indicates him as "one of you" (Mt 26: 21; Mk 14: 18; Jn 6: 70; 13: 21). And Peter will say of Judas that "he was numbered among us and allotted his share in this ministry" (Acts 1: 17).

He is therefore a figure belonging to the group of those whom Jesus had chosen as strict companions and collaborators. This brings with it two questions in the attempt to provide an explanation for what happened.

The first consists in asking how is it that Jesus had chosen this man and trusted him. In fact, although Judas is the group's bursar (cf. Jn. 12: 6b; 13: 29a), in reality he is called a "thief" (Jn 12: 6a).

The mystery of the choice remains, all the more since Jesus pronounces a very severe judgement on him: "Woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed!" (Mt 26: 24).

What is more, it darkens the mystery around his eternal fate, knowing that Judas "repented and brought back the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood"" (Mt 27: 3-4). Even though he went to hang himself (cf. Mt 27: 5), it is not up to us to judge his gesture, substituting ourselves for the infinitely merciful and just God.

A second question deals with the motive of Judas' behaviour: why does he betray Jesus? The question raises several theories. Some refer to the fact of his greed for money; others hold to an explanation of a messianic order: Judas would have been disappointed at seeing that Jesus did not fit into his programme for the political-militaristic liberation of his own nation.

In fact, the Gospel texts insist on another aspect: John expressly says that "the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him" (Jn 13: 2). Analogously, Luke writes: "Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve" (Lk

22: 3).

In this way, one moves beyond historical motivations and explanations based on the personal responsibility of Judas, who shamefully ceded to a temptation of the Evil One.

The betrayal of Judas remains, in any case, a mystery. Jesus treated him as a friend (cf. Mt 26: 50); however, in his invitations to follow him along the way of the beatitudes, he does not force his will or protect it from the temptations of Satan, respecting human freedom.

In effect, the possibilities to pervert the human heart are truly many. The only way to prevent it consists in not cultivating an individualistic, autonomous vision of things, but on the contrary, by putting oneself always on the side of Jesus, assuming his point of view. We must daily seek to build full communion with him.

Let us remember that Peter also wanted to oppose him and what awaited him at Jerusalem, but he received a very strong reproval: "You are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mk 8: 33)!

After his fall Peter repented and found pardon and grace. Judas also repented, but his repentance degenerated into desperation and thus became self-destructive.

For us it is an invitation to always remember what St Benedict says at the end of the fundamental Chapter Five of his "Rule": "Never despair of God's mercy". In fact, God "is greater than our hearts", as St John says (I Jn 3: 20).

Let us remember two things. The first: Jesus respects our freedom. The second: Jesus awaits our openness to repentance and conversion; he is rich in mercy and forgiveness.

Besides, when we think of the negative role Judas played we must consider it according to the lofty ways in which God leads events. His betrayal led to the death of Jesus, who transformed this tremendous torment into a space of salvific love by consigning himself to the Father (cf. Gal 2: 20; Eph 5: 2, 25).

The word "to betray" is the version of a Greek word that means "to consign". Sometimes the subject is even God in person: it was he who for love "consigned" Jesus for all of us (Rm 8: 32). In his mysterious salvific plan, God assumes Judas' inexcusable gesture as the occasion for the total gift of the Son for the redemption of the world.

In conclusion, we want to remember he who, after Easter, was elected in place of the betrayer. In the Church of Jerusalem two were proposed to the community, and then lots were cast for their names: "Joseph called Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias" (Acts 1: 23).

Precisely the latter was chosen, hence, "he was enrolled with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1: 26). We know nothing else about him, if not that he had been a witness to all Jesus' earthly events (cf. Acts 1: 21-22), remaining faithful to him to the end. To the greatness of his fidelity was later added the divine call to take the place of Judas, almost compensating for his betrayal.

We draw from this a final lesson: while there is no lack of unworthy and traitorous Christians in the Church, it is up to each of us to counterbalance the evil done by them with our clear witness to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

To Special Groups

I welcome the English-speaking pilgrims here today, especially the Sisters of Providence who have come for the Canonization of Mother Théodore Guérin. I greet also the pilgrims from Africa, Asia, Britain and Ireland, Scandinavia and the United States of America. May God pour out his Blessings upon all of you and your loved ones at home.

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