

Lord, is it I?

Now when even was come, He was sitting at meat with the twelve disciples; and as they were eating, He said, Verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began to say unto Him every one, Is it I, Lord? And He answered and said, He that dipped his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me. The Son of Man goeth, even as it is written of Him: but woe unto that man through whom the Son of Man is betrayed! good were it for that man if he had not been born. And Judas, which betrayed Him, answered and said, Is it I, Rabbi? He saith unto him, Thou hast said.

Matt. 26: 20-25

We can make no better use of Passiontide than to conjure up afresh to ourselves the drama of the suffering and the dying of our Lord, and to accompany Him as it were on the way to the cross, bearing in mind that most challenging question of the disciples which stands in our text to-day: Lord, is it I?" For the passion and death of our Lord is for us not merely one series of events alongside a multitude of others, but rather the central point: in the whole Bible, the basic theme in that whole composition which is the history of humanity. For there happened there what happened nowhere else, what happened only there and then, once for all: the redemption of the world, which indeed took place for all, but which benefits only him who can ask the question, "Lord, is it I?" and to whom in consequence the conviction strikes home: Yes, you, precisely you, are responsible. All that was done on my behalf, I am he in whose stead Jesus surfers the

punishment of the cross; it is I for whom the passion is borne: yes, it is indeed I.

First, our story stands so to speak under the shadow which the cross casts before it—that cross upon which Jesus will hang half a day later. The presentiment of what is to come hangs in the air in that small upper room where the disciples sit at table with their Master and eat the Last Supper. But even for Jesus Himself it is not yet quite simply predetermined that events must so shape themselves. That hour in the garden of Gethsemane has not yet come in which Jesus, troubled unto death, prays the Father that He would allow the cup of suffering to pass away from Him. On the other hand He has already predicted to the disciples many days previously that the Son of Man would be betrayed and crucified. And again during this meal Jesus will speak to His disciples those words in which He will explain to them and to us the meaning of His death as the effective operation and token of divine atonement. At this point we are faced by the impenetrable mystery of the divine humanity of Jesus who knows on the one hand what the divine will is and is wholly at one with it, and who yet on the other hand does not see it simply as something predetermined, but rather as something which is still in the balance, and therefore can still ask the Father to let the cup pass from Him. The narrative which we have just read gives us an insight into just this duality and tension.

The Lord has seated Himself at table with His twelve disciples. All twelve are there for the last time; on the way to Gethsemane, indeed as the solemn meal is partaken of, there are only eleven; for the twelfth has now gone his own way, that fearful way which must have a fearful end. Until this hour it had been impossible for the disciples to think otherwise than that they, the twelve, inseparably belonged to Jesus. It could never have entered their heads that one of them might not be present when the others were enjoying fellowship with Jesus. For not in vain had Jesus chosen twelve; He wished thus to make it clear that He was conscious of His membership in the people of Israel, composed as it was of twelve tribes, and that in all that He says, does and suffers He is primarily working on behalf of this His own people, the people of the Jews. Jesus Himself is of course by blood a Jew—born of the seed of David according to the flesh.

For all time it is to be made clear that Jesus does not disown His Jewish blood and that He who inaugurates the new covenant desires that this His new covenant shall not be understood as superseding the old covenant but as fulfilling it. So much the number twelve is

intended to signify—and the disciples correctly understood it in this sense when a few weeks later they fill the gap left by the betrayal and suicide of Judas, electing in his place another and a faithful disciple.

Still less for the disciples than for Jesus is the shape of things to come, something clear, predetermined and foreknown. No doubt Jesus spoke to them repeatedly of His imminent passion and death. But they did not rightly appreciate His statements and refused to believe them until at last compelled to do so. That last and single stroke of the sword which one of the disciples executes as Jesus is taken prisoner in the garden of Gethsemane is a sufficient indication of this; only when Jesus is led away captive and they themselves have taken flight did the terrible truth dawn on them that Jesus was now about to die. It may be indeed that Peter followed Him because he still cherished a faint hope that all might, in the end yet be well and there be no sentence of death.

For this reason the word with which Jesus breaks silence comes as a thunderclap: One of you will betray me. How could such a thing be possible? And we, too, as we think of the treachery of Judas, ask ourselves how it could be possible. The name of Judas has become for us one of the most terrible names in the whole history of humanity which nevertheless records many terrible names—names which are especially terrible because of the unfathomable mystery of evil. How was it possible, how can such things be?

Closely linked with the inner sinister secret of the treachery of Judas is the problem which the event presents in its external aspect. We do not even know precisely in what the betrayal consists. Was it only that he betrayed to the enemies of Jesus the spot in which the Lord was accustomed to tarry at night, so that they could conveniently arrest Him without any popular rising—any resistance on the part of the masses who were friendly to Jesus? Or did the betrayal consist in something quite different, in the betrayal of the secret Messiahship, as many learned Biblical critics suppose? And, furthermore, the motive of Judas is not clear. The evangelists suggest principally the motive of avarice. But could that really have been the deciding factor? Of course in recent years we have had to witness the sorry spectacle of men being prepared to betray their country for a few sordid pounds. But could Jesus really have chosen as one of His disciples a man who found it possible to betray his Master for such petty reasons? At this point we should perhaps incline to the view of those exegetes who put us on quite a different track by drawing our attention to the motive of disillusionment. Judas was

disappointed by Jesus because disillusioned about the character of His Messiahship. He had obeyed the call of the Messiah because he had hoped that He would bring about the emancipation of Israel from the Roman oppressor and thus establish definitely a glorious and powerful Davidic kingdom.

But then he was compelled to recognize increasingly that Jesus was not that sort of Messiah. The story of the anointing at Bethany, when Jesus spoke plainly of His death as imminent, indicates a first step which Judas took to betray Jesus. On that occasion the eyes of Judas were opened; he must then have thought that he had been following a false Messiah and had been cheated. For Jesus had promised the coming of the kingdom of God and yet was now moving towards a criminal's death. He then decides that he no longer belongs to the circle of chosen disciples; on the contrary he proposes to have his revenge on the deceiver, the false Messiah. Hence he comes to his decision to betray Him.

I do not know whether such were really the actuating motives of Judas; no one can make categorical affirmations or denials in this matter. In the last resort we are compelled to confess: we do not know. That in itself is a puzzle but behind that puzzle lies a far deeper, more sinister, mystery: whatever were the thoughts and the motives of Judas, one thing is clear: he betrayed his Master, parted company with Him, and thus from being His disciple became quite unequivocally His enemy. That is the incomprehensible, awful, and sinister fact. A man who during the whole period of the Lord's public ministry companied with Him, hearing every one of His words, witnessing every one of His deeds, eating and drinking daily with Him and belonging to His most intimate circle of friends, to those who knew Him far better than any one else and to whom He confided everything, confided such things as He could not have confided to the crowd and who had thus been elected along with the other eleven to be the witness and apostle of the Gospel message—it was such an elect servant who was able to become the enemy of Jesus. Therein lies the essence of this dreadful and sinister mystery.

My friends, pause a moment to reflect upon this fact: it was actually possible for one of the disciples to become the enemy of Jesus and to betray Him to a hostile gang. That fact struck the disciples too as a gruesome and unfathomable mystery. Hence the evangelists Luke and John inserted into their narrative the gloss: "Then Satan entered into the heart of Judas called Iscariot." Here we are faced by an intractable secret, not the secret of God but that of Satan. I realize

that there are many of us who do not believe in a devil and we are not required to believe in a devil, we are required to believe in God alone. But to those who assume that there is no devil I would like to say: you have not yet understood the depths of evil: you have not yet come to grips with this fact—Judas betrays his Lord. Nor have you yet measured the depths of your own wickedness.

But in the first shock of surprise when Jesus announced the imminence of His betrayal without naming the betrayer, the immediate reaction of the disciples was different. They did not primarily shudder to think that such a deed should be possible, they shuddered about themselves. They were seized by the awful fear: might I myself in the last resort be responsible for this treachery? “Lord, is it I?” My friends, I would like this “Lord, is it I?” now and ever anew to pierce us to our heart’s core. Is it possible that I too might be capable of betraying Jesus and becoming His enemy?

Shortly afterwards, when Judas had stolen away, Jesus, looking into the face of the eleven, said something similar though not quite the same, and more in sadness than criticism: “Ye shall all be offended in me”, i.e. be repelled and lose faith in me. And at the same moment He said to Peter in particular, to Peter to whom only a short while previously He had declared that upon him He would build His church, “before the cock crow thou shalt deny me thrice”. Denial, confusion and deviation is not as bad as treachery, as decisive hostility. Yet, if I may so say, the former tends in the same direction. And this being offended, dismayed and confused, Jesus predicted to all His disciples equally.

For this reason the question “Lord is it I?” is one which we must all put to ourselves. Am I not one who has already turned his back on Jesus and gone over to the enemy? Have I not already become offended and fallen into devious ways? Have I not already denied Him? When we seriously ask ourselves these questions and honestly examine our consciences, we must answer them in the affirmative. Theoretically, of course, in a simple credal catechism, we would repudiate such suggestions. No, I am not an enemy of Jesus; I believe in Him, I worship Him, I pray to Him, I confess Him to be the true Son of God and Saviour. That is all very well in so far as it goes. Many a one hits the bull’s-eye in shooting practice, but on the field of battle, when surrounded by perils, he collapses and hits nothing. As long as we confine ourselves to a simple examination of our faith, in the abstract, apart from the test of events, we can confidently declare our faith in and love to Jesus, just as Peter was fully convinced that

He would never deny His Lord. His indignant repudiation of the prediction of Jesus was, to be sure, spoken in all honesty—and yet he did deny Him three times before the night was over, before the cock crew. When perils press upon us and our life is endangered, then it is no longer so easy to confess Jesus. Then the question is just this: what do you now prefer to do, remain loyal to Jesus and die or deny Jesus and live?

I do not suggest that there is no value in confessing Jesus even when there is no danger in doing so. On the contrary, if we do not do that then, still less shall we be able to do it in the hour of crisis. But what our story teaches us is this: a confession which takes place on the shooting ground, and not in the field of battle, is not the decisive thing. In itself it offers no guarantee that we shall acquit ourselves in the moment of danger. We must indeed practise shooting, but only in the hour of battle is it seen how much has been gained thereby.

With the disciples we must be told that ever and again we abandon Jesus, turn our backs on Him, and so to speak for the moment surrender Him in favour of something which seems to us more important; thus in spite of everything we do what is not so very unlike the treachery of Judas, simply because we love ourselves and the world more dearly than we love our Lord, because time is always more precious to us than eternity. The sin which we commit consists in this; that we forget Jesus or as it were say to Him: Please leave me alone just now, I will come back to You again, but for the moment You are in my way. All sin consists in this kind of deviation from Jesus, this separation from Him, this pursuit of one's own paths, this denial and then, also, in the last resort, betrayal, the going over to the enemy.

And yet Jesus makes a big distinction between what Judas does and what the disciples will do on that fatal night. Only to Judas does He address the fearful saying: "It would have been better for that man not to have been born."

He does not say this even to Peter when He declares to him that he will deny Him thrice. We are rather too readily inclined to assert that all sins are equally important and that there is no reason to discriminate between them. Jesus makes a big distinction between the sin of Judas and that of Peter and of the other disciples. The distinction is this: neither Peter in his fear for his life, there in the court of the high priest's palace, nor the disciples who forsook Him and fled, intended finally to dissociate themselves from Jesus. Peter on hearing the cock crow went out and wept bitterly. Not so Judas. He took the irrevocable step of joining the enemies of Jesus. And

when he eventually realized the nature of his deed in all clarity and insight he had no longer the power or courage or capacity to weep bitterly, to turn again and do penance. In that moment of realization he went out and hanged himself. There is a degree of dissociation from Jesus which can never be made good. Let us not think: I will never act as Judas did. You can never know in advance how far your unfaithfulness to Jesus will carry you. Let us rather constantly reflect that every sin has essentially something of the character of Judas' treachery about it, for every sin means to turn one's back on Jesus, to dissociate oneself from Him. Hence the more self-willed it is, the more deliberately we yield to temptation, so much the more does it resemble the deed of Judas, so much the more are we threatened by the danger of never again being able to return and find the tears of penitence.

But may our concluding reflection not be concerned with ourselves but with Jesus. For this drama turns upon Him, not upon us. Let us note one further point. Jesus wished to save Judas even at this eleventh hour, when the latter had already agreed with the enemies of Jesus to betray Him, even at the very moment when Judas was about to fulfil his intention. For this reason He says with fine reserve: One of you ... He expresses Himself so because it is His last warning to Judas, a Saviour's ultimatum as it were. He still wants to keep faithful to Himself even that man who has already become a traitor—if it is at all possible. That reflection is a great consolation to us all. There is still room for repentance even though the possibility may be finally excluded. It is not yet too late as long as you can hear the voice of Jesus and allow it to strike home to your heart. "Whosoever cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

The story of the treachery of Judas is followed immediately by that of the Last Supper: the New Covenant in my blood. No one is excluded from this covenant who seriously endeavours to find an entry. For Jesus Christ came into the world and died on the cross that all who believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. There are rooms in order to enter which you must stoop if you are not to knock your head. The cross of Jesus Christ is the door to communion with God and everlasting life. You must stoop if you wish to go in; otherwise you will knock your head and find no admittance. God grant that we may all rightly stoop under the door of the cross while as we gaze upon His cross we put to ourselves the question: "Lord, is it I?" and that we may receive the humbling and miraculously comforting answer: "Yes, it is you."