

## Spy Wednesday 2015 – Judas

John 13: 21-32

The Reverend Ruth Hulse

I'm sure most, if not all of you have been to a pantomime and know the different cheers and shouts you, as the audience, are meant to give when certain characters come onto the stage. He's behind you! Oh no he isn't, oh yes he is! When the villain of the story appears, the place erupts with BOO and HISSES as the audience warn the 'good' characters that danger is approaching.

Wednesday of Holy Week, or Spy Wednesday as it is also known, is the day when we recall the account of Judas Iscariot making that decision to betray Jesus to the chief priests and the Pharisees, to become their spy as they seek ways to arrest Jesus. If there was ever a villain of the Easter story, it has to be Judas,

Or does it?

I remember sitting with a group of 9 and 10 year olds when one of them suddenly turned to me and asked, 'Did Judas go to heaven?' Out of the mouths of babes.

Did Judas go to heaven? After what he did? After handing Jesus over to be crucified? After taking money in exchange for Jesus? After making the choice to do this?

Well, that's one way of looking at it, on the one hand, all the above are true...

But on the other hand – we can ask questions like, did Judas have a choice? Was he fulfilling the prophecies and therefore a vital part of God's plan? Did it have to be this way; a betrayal?

It's very easy to vilify Judas and make him a scapegoat, very easy to think boo and hiss when we read what he did, but when Jesus prayed on the cross, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do', he prays that for the soldiers at the foot of the cross, but surely he also prays it for all those who had a part to play in his death, in this act of salvation. We say every week in our services, 'Almighty God who forgives all who truly repent,' and Matthew tells us that Judas did just that as he tried to give back the money he had been given.

The artist Laurence Whistler created a set of thirteen engraved windows for a parish church, one for each of the disciples and one for Jesus. It was the twelfth window that made people uncomfortable and was the cause of many discussions in the parish. This window was for Judas. It showed Judas with a rope around his neck being pulled into heaven, the coins, the blood money, falling from his hands and becoming petals and blossoming flowers on the ground. Eventually that window became known as the forgiveness window.

What is it about Judas being depicted as forgiven that initially made the people in that community so uncomfortable? Was it the idea that Judas had been forgiven by the man he betrayed to his death; or that Judas' part in the crucifixion really did make him the villain of the story and he can't possibly deserve forgiveness; that Judas was outside the grace of God because of his actions?

Thankfully that's not the message of the cross that we celebrate and share with others. The message of the cross is that God's grace encompasses all and his forgiveness for those who repent is not exclusive. When we say the words of the confession every time we join together for the Eucharist, we acknowledge that we too, in our own way, have betrayed Jesus and need his forgiveness, and we receive it. The hope is that we then pass on this grace and forgiveness to others as we remember that at the heart of our celebrations is the grace, mercy and forgiveness of God that reaches everyone. No-one is outside of that reach. Not Judas, not those who wrong us, and not us.