

Ash Wednesday: February 17, 2021
“Differing Agendas”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This Lenten Season we are going to look at confessions spoken by the enemies of Christ. Looking at the words spoken by Jesus’ foes are very instructive. We have all different kinds of people spewing words of contempt and hatred toward the Savior. We have words of scorn and derision from many different classes of people with varying gifts intellectually, emotionally, socially, and morally. Simeon spoke of Jesus when Jesus was just a baby, “***Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.***”¹

The sign of Jesus, the cross of Jesus, the need for Jesus to die certainly reveals many hearts. We begin on Ash Wednesday with one of His greatest enemies. Through the prophet Joel we hear, “***‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the LORD, your God.***”²

This is what God speaks to all, including His enemies. Who is Jesus’ greatest enemy? Would not most quickly say, “Judas Iscariot”? Judas was with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry, and it was clear that Judas had a different agenda. Before we get to that agenda, it is important to remember the Eighth Commandment. How can we defend, speak well of and put the best construction on Judas? Many try, and do so falsely. The world likes to pretend that Judas was a victim. They argue that he was selected by God as a scapegoat for the rest of the world. They try and twist Judas into being the martyr; that somehow Jesus would not have died and there would be no salvation if it wasn’t for Judas’ sacrifice.

As you read the through the Scriptures, you know better. He was a man who could pass off to his friends as a good and decent man. He was respectable and a worker with the twelve. If he wasn’t, would they not have thrown him out at some point

¹ Luke 2:34–35

² Joel 2:12-13

during their three years together? Various scholars over the years have tried to argue that Judas was a true patriot, a leader of the rebel revolution and was simply trying to force Jesus into the limelight and take the reigns of kingship that were due to Him. It has also been argued that Judas was an innocent fool, duped by the leaders of the Jews, and the disciples held a grudge against him; thereby painting him in a negative light in their writings.

Close reading of the Scriptures tells a different story. Judas went to the chief priests with the very intention of betraying Jesus. He wanted to know how much he was going to get by betraying Jesus. John records, *“Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ‘Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?’ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.”*³

Judas is a recorded example of Romans 8, *“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”*⁴ To whom are these words of Romans directed? All people, including you and me. On this night, we pray Psalm 51, which includes a deep confession, *“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”*⁵ If we honestly read the Word of God, we find we are His enemies; our sinful nature is hostile to Him. The sinful nature wants not what God wants. This night we gather and are reminded of the wages of sin as the symbol of death and rebellion is placed visibly upon our foreheads.

Then we hear from Matthew 6, and our own agendas are exposed, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them...Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust*

³ John 12:1–6

⁴ Romans 8:7–8

⁵ Psalm 51:5

destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁶

Judas was stealing from the common treasury. He was placed in a position to be a steward of the money bag for the good of others; instead, he took what he wanted to satisfy his own desires. We too have been given many goods and are placed in positions of stewardship of gifts, time, and talents to be used for the good of others and the building of Christ’s kingdom. What do we do with them? Do we use them for the good of our neighbor and the building of God’s Kingdom? Do we do them so that others will see just how much we are doing, and how good of a person we are? Do we live in such a way that we are hoping someone will write a great obituary about me one day, or is our agenda to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven?

The Lord says, “Return to Me. Rend your hearts and not your garments.” This season of Lent is a time to reflect upon the use of our stewardship in time, in talents, in money. Where we use these things to our own agenda, and not to God’s we are called to repent.

It is great practice, but really hard, to place ourselves in the place of Judas. When we do, we learn that our actions, our habits, can be helpful or hurtful to not only others, but to our spiritual life. If we are dishonest and greedy, it may spring up in the most unpleasant ways and lead us into the most unexpected sins. The same thing could be said about other sins as well, such as gossip, or pride, or treating people badly. We can see how important it is to be deliberately Christian and to walk in holiness at all times. We are sinners, and we will never do this perfectly, but if we are casual about our morality, we only give the devil an opportunity.

This is the point of our fasting. If it is your practice to give up something for Lent, that is only half of the struggle. The idea behind the fast is to fill that space with the word of God. Where you would have spent time engaging in whatever action or behavior you are giving up, you are instead to practice discipline and fill that time with reading God’s Word and prayer. As you are immersed in His Word, you will see over and over God’s agenda, and He will change and strengthen you towards

⁶ Matthew 6:1, 19–21

His agenda.

Even harder to hear is the simple fact that sitting in this building does not guarantee salvation. It is a good habit, and is helpful if used properly; but look again at Judas. Judas sat through the meal with the other disciples. He partook of the Sacrament with them, as Jesus instituted it for them - and us. He allowed Jesus to wash his feet, just as all the rest did. All the while, he had it in his heart to sell Jesus into the hands of those who wanted to kill Him. He could do all of that because the devil was in him. He is the perfect illustration of the hypocrite. Hypocrites know that they are different. They often imagine that it is a good thing. They don't believe the things that are taught, and they go through the motions aware that it is being done for appearances.

Sadly, Judas came to repent, but he did not come to believe. Jesus was on the way to the cross to suffer for the sins of Judas, no less than anyone else, but Judas could not hear or believe that. Jesus had spoken about it at dinner, and Judas had received the Holy Supper, as you will tonight, but he received it blasphemously, that is, without faith. And when he needed forgiveness most, he was unable to trust in Jesus for it; instead he takes the money back to the Pharisees and was still set on doing things his own way.

Judas' agenda was for himself. When the hour of need came, he was only able to see himself. He did not see that Jesus died for Judas too. As we have learned tonight, we really cannot be too hard on Judas. We are no different in our sins, with our own agendas. We know of the forgiveness of sins. We have seen the price paid to the end, which Judas did not. We have professed faith in Christ and joy in our salvation, and that we know the hope of salvation and resurrection, and yet we choose ourselves, our comfort, our pleasures over Christ time and time again. We choose to miss worship, as though Jesus and the gospel is nothing much to miss. We step away from the fellowship of believers here for personal reasons, and when someone challenges us, or inquires about our well-being, we defend our absences (*either out loud or to ourselves*) with talk about having a right to this or that, or thoughts of how it is none of anyone's business, and how we are free to do as we wish.

But we are not free, thank God. We have been bought with a price. We have been

purchased and won from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. Our time and our very lives belong to Him. The fact that we can live them much in the way we wish is another good thing given to us by God! That we think of our time and our money and our liberties as given to us for our joy and our purposes, rather than His purposes, often leads us into sins of thought, spilling out in word and deed.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we not only are reminded of our death and mortality by the ashes on our foreheads, we also hear the absolution and are reminded of the death of Christ for you. The symbol of His death directs our attention to the baptismal font where your death and mortality are drowned to be joined in Christ's eternal life and immortality. The absolution is spoken directly to you, and the symbol of your payment for sins leads you to the very supper of His own body and blood, where you eat and drink for life and forgiveness.

The font drowns enemies and gives birth to family. Brothers and sisters in Christ, here is your food, here is your strength. Here we proclaim the Lord's death. His agenda was to die and save you. Whatever the devil, the world, or your own sinful nature has in store to try and entice or force you away, look at what God has done for you.

As we walk through this season of Lent, we already know,

"I will tell of your name to my brothers;

in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

You who fear the Lord, praise him!

All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,

and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

For he has not despised or abhorred

the affliction of the afflicted,

and he has not hidden his face from him,

but has heard, when he cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

my vows I will perform before those who fear him.

The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;

those who seek him shall praise the Lord!

May your hearts live forever!

*All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.
For kingship belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.
All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
even the one who could not keep himself alive.
Posterity shall serve him;
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;
they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,
that he has done it.”⁷ Amen.*

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

⁷ Psalm 22:22–31

**Prayer of the Church
Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2021**

P Let us pray:

O Lord, our heavenly Father, You desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that we would turn from our evil ways and live. Turn us again, O God of our salvation, and let Your anger cease from us. Spare us from every evil to body and soul.

Look graciously on Your Church, and preserve the Gospel among us. Renew us in this penitential season to strive against the desires of the flesh, to grow in the joy of Your salvation, and to look in love and service toward our neighbors, especially those of the household of faith.

Look graciously on the families of our congregation. Defend Your holy estate of marriage against every enemy that would divide. Strengthen parents for their duties, especially bringing up their children in the fear and instruction of the Lord, and preserve us all faithful to the end.

Look graciously on our nation and its leaders, all civil servants, and those who protect us and work for the common good. Drive away all disease and fear from us. Grant peace, we pray, O Lord.

Behold in mercy all who are sick, who suffer and who rejoice; and be with all expectant mothers, all whose labor is dangerous, the unemployed, those near death and those who mourn. Give comfort to us, who are dust and must return to dust, that a broken and contrite heart You will not despise.

We thank You, heavenly Father, that You have sent Your only begotten Son into our flesh to offer Himself as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Trusting in His mercy, bring us in repentance and faith to Your altar to eat His body and drink His blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Graciously receive our prayers, deliver and preserve us, for to You alone we give all glory, honor and worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C **Amen.**