

Dear Friends,

Mark 14: 43-45

Jesus has been praying. His disciples have been sleeping. Well, one of his disciples has been awake. He has been very busy. And now he is coming towards Jesus. It's Judas. We don't need reminding, but to underline the point we are told that he's "one of the twelve". He is one of Jesus' closest friends. Jesus trusts him. They share meals together. Judas is able to get close to him, close enough to kiss him.

And Judas does not come alone. He has a crowd with him. They are carrying swords and clubs. This is not a well-disciplined group of people who are keen to see good order maintained. This is a mob, a rabble. They will not be denied their right to carry weapons and they are looking for opportunities to use them. Those in power have stirred them up. They have urged them to go to Jesus. They have encouraged them to be ready to fight. They have made them feel that their desire for violence is legitimate.

Judas approaches Jesus. He, one of the disciples, addresses his master with reverence. He calls him "Rabbi" or "Teacher". Then he kisses him. He is giving a sign to the crowd. He is saying, "this is the man that you want". It may be a surprise that Jesus needs to be identified. The picture we have is that he's had a high profile. Crowds cheered him when he came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. He caused uproar in the temple by clearing it. He taught out in the open where he could be freely and easily seen. His face must have become familiar to everyone. Maybe he was not as well-known as we have come to think or perhaps the authorities just wanted to make absolutely sure that they got the right man.

How does Jesus feel? It is horrific when someone deliberately chooses to make you suffer. It's even harder to bear when the one who wrongs you is a trusted friend, one whose company you have enjoyed at meals, maybe one who has given you affectionate kisses. On the surface they have smiled at you, while underneath they have been acting in ways which hurt and cause you great harm.

How does Judas feel? He goes up to Jesus "at once". He does what he has to do quickly. Does the speed with which he acts show his confidence? Is he absolutely convinced that he's doing the right thing? Or is he filled with doubts and so has to act fast, before he changes his mind?

At this point we need to acknowledge a problem. The name Judas comes from the tribe of Judah. He was a man of Judah. It was from the name given to that tribe that the word "Jew" came. The Christian church has often sinned greatly in its treatment of Jewish people. The roots of this can be found in the scriptures, in this story of Judas betraying Jesus, in John's gospel where "the Jews" are repeatedly held responsible for the death of Jesus. At times people in the church have allowed this to ignite the evil of prejudice. There's an example in the words of Martin Luther. He played an important role in reforming the church, but listen to his shocking words. "Shut up the Jews in a stable. Let their young men do forced labour. Set

their houses of prayer on fire. They are not human. Think what Judas did". These offensive words are not true to Jesus the Jew who has nothing to do with the divisions that we place upon people, who taught of God's love for all.

In Mark's gospel, nothing else is said about Judas. His story just comes to an end. He fades into silence and nothingness. Matthew tells us that after betraying Jesus, Judas is filled with remorse. Life becomes unbearable and he hangs himself. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles says that he dies when his body becomes swollen, ruptures, bursts open and his bowels gush out. In Dante's poem, *The Divine Comedy*, he is consigned to the heart of Hell where he spends eternity in the jaws of Satan. I can't help wondering if the forgiveness and love of God could embrace Judas, that Jesus would not give up on him, as he did not give up on those who deserted him.

God bless you,

Tony