

On the way to Calvary - Hilary McDowell
Week 5 Choices
Wednesday - A Kind of Loving



Jesus Arrested

Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.

Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." Then everyone deserted him and fled. *Mark 14:43-50 (NIV)*

How many times had Jesus given them the sign of peace? During Passover, at Sabbath worship, visiting in the home at Bethany, when walking through cornfields, sailing across Galilee, preaching to crowds on a hilltop? How many times? She could only guess. How often was it used in her church at home?

In her time it usually took the form of a religious benediction spoken formally by the minister. Sometimes, in less formal worship, the congregation would be invited to turn to one another and, smiling, hand clasped around hand, all four hands involved in the embrace, each pair of worshippers would express their bond of peace and fellowship. However it was done, it was meant to be a love sign, Christian to Christian, and God to his children.

The gesture that Judas chose to signal who Jesus was, in order to betray him, was the self-same gesture of love and devotion used by any disciple when he greeted his rabbi, a sign of homage. So when Judas used it this time, it signalled only a lie. Rather than bowing the knee, Judas was, by this sign, betraying his master.

She wished she could see inside this disciples' head. By what crazy 'double-speak' had he talked himself into this act of treachery? Surely it couldn't have

been for money: he soon discarded his payment of thirty silver pieces. Did some misunderstanding, perverted religious or political agenda push Judas to test Christ's hand, attempting to force him to 'bringing the kingdom' immediately? Did he actually think he was helping Christ, judging the progression of the events of that critical week by his own feeble human standards? There was no way for the traveller to be able to answer her own questions, only the Boss himself knew the thoughts in the heart of Judas. It was a salutary reminder to her, though, of how any individual, pushed to the limits of their own thinking and standards, could justify anything to themselves, as regards their own actions at any given point in their journey to Calvary.

How many acts of religious intolerance have sheltered under the flag of patriotism? She thought. How many acts of violence, by bomb or law or tongue, sheltered behind a shield of genuine religious zeal? How many times does fear, greed or impatience for a solution to an unresolved and critical problem push otherwise decent people towards the very edge of the precipice of their own convictions? How many allow that pressure to push them over the cliff?

In Judas' hands that evening the future salvation of the world did not lie. In his hands lay only a decision about what kind of loving he would show to the one who already loved him unconditionally. The kiss of a disciple for his master is indeed a special kind of loving. Judas did not merely twist it that night, but betrayed the relationship with his Lord built up over the preceding three years. Tracy's thoughts ran on: if the relationship with Jesus means anything, it has to mean trust - trust that Christ really does know what he is about in our lives, even if the circumstances in which we find ourselves are shot to pieces and we don't know why. The relationship has to mean love, not merely the outward gestures of dutiful religious observance and practice, like Judas' kiss, but the daily inner sacrifice of body, will and soul in that hard trek all the way to Calvary. It means the joy of doing the Master's will because we feel his pleasure affirming our actions. What pleasure did Judas feel that night when he heard Jesus say the words, 'Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man? (Luke 22:48). The traveller could not clearly see the look exchanged between the two dramatic figures, standing face to face in the darkness, but she knew that the subsequent actions of the betrayer would be eloquent enough testimony of the innocence he saw in Jesus' face (Matthew 27:3-5).

Remembering her dream, Tracy imagined herself picking up those thirty pieces of silver, gathering them slowly, piece by tainted piece, and lying them before the chief priests to ask, 'Is this the price you would put on the Messiah's head?' but then she would have been preaching to the converted, for weren't they

already aware of the implications of the betrayal? (Matthew 27:6). But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, had said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.' She could not discern a sense of remorse in what she read in the Gospels. There was only an obsessive desire to keep the law and not taint the treasury, and no desire at all to open their minds to the possibility of a startling new truth. The very Saviour whose coming heralded the fulfilment of the law itself was sold for a pittance and their concern was rather for the unsullied nature of the treasury. The law could not fault these zealous religious leaders. No wonder Jesus had to come.

Tracy longed to tell them about the mercy, love and justice that would be executed for all time at Calvary. It was a cautionary tale indeed for the Church of every age. She could not make a difference to the situation in Palestine just then; but Tracy knew that she must return soon to the modern church, and there resolve to help change things for the kingdom of God would be tested.

Strange, she mused, that it should be Judas himself whom God permitted to testify to Jesus' innocence within the very stronghold of the enemy, at a time when that powerful committee of chief priests and elders were meeting to seal the final plans for his death (Matthew 27:4). Was it one last chance for those 'holy men' to see the error of their ways? But they would reject the opportunity and the die would be cast, not only for Judas, but also for themselves.

Suddenly she was jolted back to the events right there in the garden of Gethsemane. Peter was proving his allegiance to the Prince of Peace by lashing out and cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave. Tracy cast her mind back to the upper room when, following the supper, Jesus had tried to prepare the disciples for their impending trauma (Luke 22: 31-38). As they appeared to be unaware of how close they were to the moment of ultimate danger, Jesus employed some pretty drastic shock tactics. He appeared to contradict some of his previous teaching about not relying upon worldly means for their survival - 'no purse, no bag, no sandals' (Luke 10:4) - and told them to equip themselves with these very items, as well as a sword. Tracy wondered if Jesus was trying to shake them from their complacency. In preparing them for the bereavement ahead, he was recalling to their minds the world's false security and their own vulnerability. As Jesus was not in the business of contradicting himself, Tracy imagined that he meant his words not to be taken literally, but the upshot of his attempt to alert them was that this went completely over their heads. Unfortunately, they did take his comments quite literally. 'Look, Lord,' they said, 'here are two swords.'

Tracy could imagine what a long sigh Jesus might justifiably have made at this suggestion. He must have realised at this point that they still had not got the message. Patiently he dismissed their suggestion with casual indifference: 'It is enough,' he said.

What a long suffering teacher he was, and what a great wisdom he employed, she thought. He waited to the very moment of his arrest to make his point literally, on the edge of the sword thrust itself. His understanding of the human mind was faultless. Tracy discerned that this was one object lesson that Peter would never forget, for, sword in hand; blood dripping from the servant's ear, with the Master's reprimand ringing in his ears, the experience would have imprinted itself on that disciple's mind for ever.

'Please, come home with me, Lord,' Tracy prayed. 'Work your patient teaching there-on the riotous streets of urban English cities, where black and white wield knives of hate; on the devastated streets of Ulster where bomb and bullet and decades of terrorism hold your truth hostage to fear; and amid the dark traffic of modern minds where purse and bag, sandal and the equivalent of the sword still vie with the desire to trust only in you.' If she had still been within her dream, she would have taken that sword and attempted to break it across her knee long before the supper had ended. But then, would Peter have properly learnt his lesson for life? And what about that other sword? According to scripture, there were two swords mentioned that night. The second one must not have been used, as it was never mentioned again. Someone got the message, after all.

Mark's Gospel, she knew, made little of Peter's mistake (Mark 14:47), but John would not only tell us that Peter was the culprit; he would give the very name of the slave (John 18:10). She had sometimes wondered whether he had stayed close to Jesus to do a little 'follow up' on the healing that Christ performed immediately to the wounded ear. Certainly the other disciples did not. When they realised that Jesus was forbidding them to use physical defence, they could imagine no other way of helping him, and they fled.

Dear Master,

Grant me a holy imagination - the ability to discover ways and means of solving problems that do not utilise the ways and means of this world. You showed so clearly by your life and ministry that the end cannot be made to justify the means. But Lord, the alternative solution might cost me dearly. What would imprisonment have meant to the disciples if they had stayed with Jesus in the garden? Give me courage; help me to stay. Amen.