

BETRAYAL



Jesus wanted to be the Messiah of his people: but in his pursuit of this he refused to use any instrument whatever of political, economic or religious power. He accepted becoming a victim of power and understood that this was the destiny which the Messiah could not escape.

It was in this frame of mind that he went to his encounter with Judas, as recounted by John.

Judas, a good Jew, was waiting for the Messiah, but his ambition led him to interpret the teaching of the Messiah in a reductive and material mode and, accordingly, to lose all faith in Jesus. On this night Jesus, encountering Judas, called him “friend” and used all the sweetness of one who could not give up trying to touch the heart of the Apostle without, however, compromising his freedom. But Judas had already made his choice. The kiss, which he transformed from an act of love into a vile betrayal, does even more harm to Jesus.

In John's account, after his gesture of humility and service towards the disciples whose feet he had washed, Jesus announced the betrayal that he was to suffer at the hands of Judas (John 13:21-30). Even before this, at the end of the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, John reports the first announcement of his future betrayal by one of the twelve (John 6:70-71). In the Gospels everything comes together to make inevitable the betrayal that will lead to Jesus' death.

While a number of different motivations for Judas' betrayal have been put forth, the Gospel texts focus on one particular aspect: John states specifically that it was Satan who had placed the idea of betraying Jesus in Judas' heart. Luke writes likewise (John 13:27; Luke 22:3).

Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, was the "treasurer" of the group. It is John who gives his profile, describing him as a "thief" who "held the money bag and used to steal the contributions" (John 12:4-6). Like all of the twelve, he knew well the place of Gethsemane, which was often visited by the group. In the middle of the night he who "sought a favorable opportunity to hand him over" in exchange for thirty pieces of silver – the price fixed by Mosaic law for the life of a dead slave (Exod 21:32)– led the guards to Jesus in Gethsemane (Matt 26:14-15; Luke 22:3-6). Perhaps not even Judas himself realized that his betrayal would cause the Master's death.

As Benedict XVI pointed out: "When we think of the negative role Judas played we must consider it according to the lofty ways in which God leads events. His betrayal led to the death of Jesus, who transformed this tremendous torment into a space of salvific love by consigning himself to the Father... In his mysterious salvific plan, God assumes Judas' inexcusable gesture as the occasion for the total gift of the Son for the redemption of the world" (General Audience, 18 October 2006).

The human frailty that led to the betrayal manifested itself not only in Judas, but in Peter as well, the Apostle chosen to support and gather together the disciples after Jesus' death. Unbelieving and sure of himself, Peter had not even considered the possibility of denying Jesus when, following the Last Supper, the Master informed the Apostles, and Peter above all, that Satan had demanded to sift them like wheat (Luke 22:31).

But Peter, after Jesus' arrest, denied him several times (Matt 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:12-27). Despite having followed the Master for such a great distance, his fear of being recognized as one of Jesus' followers led him to swear that he did not know him. The crow of the rooster brought him back to reality and to the recognition of his own inability to be faithful. From this recognition, and from his bitter lament described in the Synoptic Gospels, a new conversion was born in Peter, one which, in contrast with Judas, was to sustain him in his role as first among the Apostles, until his choice of martyrdom following in the footsteps of Christ.