

The process of putting ourselves in the picture, of slipping into a particular character costume can be easier with some parts than others. Zaccheus up his sycamore tree is not too difficult, the beloved disciple of John's gospel may be pleasant, given human nature doubting Thomas will resonate with most. But if we are asked to see ourselves in the events of Jesus' Passion, there is one part which can be the most trying, the most opaque, the most difficult to understand, and that is Judas. Given that he has been villified to such a degree that, in our popular idiom his very name is now a stinging insult, we may almost instinctively avoid trying too hard to slip beneath Judas' skin. But even if we pinch our noses and determine to concentrate on the character— his behaviour, his actions— even then, his betrayal seems curiously inexplicable. Judas doesn't seem to make much sense.

So I turn for help to St Augustine of Hippo, that great thinker of the Western church; not for anything he had to say about Judas, but for something he has to say about pears. Close to where Augustine grew up was a pear tree. Someone else's pear tree. And to Augustine, in common with boys across the centuries, the sight of all that 'fruit for free' proved an unbearable temptation. Nevermind that the pears were unattractive to the eye. Nevermind that the pears were unpleasant to taste. They were there, and therefore Augustine and his friends stole them whenever they could; stole them and then threw them away. In later life, Augustine laboured at length in his books *Confessions* to try to work out why as a youth he would so wantonly break the eighth commandment. Astonishingly for someone who *always* had to be right he never really found his answer.

So it usually is the way, with sin. People apprehended shoplifting are frequently caught stealing something that is of no possible value or use to them. They don't really know why they are doing it. How often does an adulterous spouse break their solemn vows only to quickly realise that it 'meant nothing to them'? Despite popular clichés, our sin is rarely exciting or noble: it is almost always pathetic and sorry, sordid and grubby, not grand and heroic.

But you might say, are we not talking about Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus? This, surely, is not run-of-the-mill sin, this is not stealing pears?

Well, I would have to say that in many ways Judas' behaviour was not really very remarkable. In fact, in its grubbiness, in its sheer pointlessness, it is exemplary for its unremarkable, everyday humanness. Who here today, if they have not betrayed a friend, has not been betrayed by one?

Everyday.

And pointless? Well thirty pieces of silver was quite a lot of money, but it wasn't winning the lottery.

Unnecessary? They would have got Jesus eventually anyway, Judas or not.

All the evangelists struggle with Judas: John's and Luke's gospels bring Satan into the equation; Satan puts the notion of betrayal into Judas' heart. But 'the devil made me do it' didn't work as an excuse for Eve; so there's no reason why we should allow it for Judas. Despite notions of money or the devil, Judas' behaviour remains petty. And if we have spent 2000 years asking "why?" , "why betray Jesus" and never quiet getting an answer we are happy with then, rather like Augustine and his pears, perhaps Judas, if asked, would not have been able to tell us quite why either.

But if the very nature of all sin is that it is intrinsically pointless, its rewards slight and transitory; its consequences are eternal. Now we do not like the idea of sin having consequences, especially if those consequences are punishment or condemnation, which the New Testament by the way is straight-down-the-line certain is the lot of Judas. So strong is this aversion that many of the Eastern churches even number Judas, so villified in the West, among the saints. But today, I won't be saying that Judas is the good guy who had a bad press; I won't be saying that Judas was really doing God's will, betraying Jesus so that he could die for us. I would hesitate to say that Judas was a saint, who can say?; but I'm confident he *was* a sinner.

Faith, hope and love are the theological virtues, the Christian virtues *par excellence*. These virtues have their opposite sins, and the opposite, the antithesis of hope, is despair. This— surely— was the sin of Judas, this is what is behind the inexplicable betrayal.

First, however, let us be quite clear. Let us not confuse the sin of despair with melancholy or psychological despair. Despair is not depression or sadness, despair is not suicidal thoughts or deeds. Judas could have been quite happy, skipping along the streets of Jerusalem, whistling a merry tune and rattling the silver in his pocket, all the time being in a deep state of the sin of despair.

We live in a vale of tears. Depression can be a readily understandable, even rational, reaction to the reality of human life. The *sin* of despair, on the other hand is to lose

hope, not in the pleasures and glories, the *vainglories* of this world, but to lose hope in the glories of God, to lose hope in his mercy, to lose hope in the world to come. To despair is to believe that God refuses pardon to the repentant sinner; to believe that there is no hope of Divine mercy. A person lost in the sin of despair ceases to hope for a share of God's goodness. It is not that they cease to believe in God; they cease to believe that God is good.

Now this sin may sound extreme, but be that doesn't mean it's not common. Be wary. Until very recently, the doctrinal basis of many of the Reformed churches had despair built right in, declaring quite explicitly that God had already decided who to save and who to damn, so that repenting was neither here nor there. Despair is one of those insidious sins that can easily affect those who fear God most. And not only is despair sneaky, it is slippery.

If the virtue of hope withdraws us from evils and induces us to seek good, then despair acts in precisely the opposite way. Without hope, we become spiritual headless chickens, sliding down the slippery slope, sinning for the sake of sinning, betraying our friends, selling our God for 30 pieces of silver.

Judas loses hope. Judas does not persevere. Judas is the shallow soil, the plant without roots in the parable of the sower and the seed. Judas expected great things of Jesus but then he quickly gave up, he quickly despaired. And when he had betrayed Jesus, Judas looked at the ways and rules of this world, he looked at human anger, human lack of forgiveness, human vengefulness and thought that was also the way of God. He betrayed Jesus, but he did not repent. We find him trying to avoid the blame, we find him trying to give the money back, literally trying to pass the buck; but not repenting, not trusting in God's mercy, not believing that there is forgiveness.

Well, let us not imbibe the pernicious poison of despair, let us not drink from Judas's cup. Rather let us hear the words of the prophet Ezekiel, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?" "When the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life."