

*"I Made Judas the Most Jewish": Rethinking the role of Judas Iscariot for  
Lent and Holy Week*

**Introduction**

Whether or not you like Monty Python, many of their asides about religion often reveal a truth or prejudice which ought to be queried. "I made Judas the most Jewish" is a case in point- it highlights the way in which the character of Judas in the Gospels has been made into an example of Jewish perfidy and become the basis for Christian anti-Semitism. As a reading of the Gospels, its just plain wrong- and we do well to reread the story of Judas carefully; for we can reflect on the great themes of Holy Week by revisiting the story of Judas, and even learn something about ourselves in the process.



<http://z.about.com/d/atheism/1/0/1/1/3/Judas-Apostle-e.jpg>

The Gospel stories do not allow for any generalisation in which Judas represents the Jewish people and makes them solely responsible for Jesus' death. Historically, they show us that both Jew and non-Jew, powerful (leaders) and weak (the baying mob), and even disciples, are implicated in what happens to Jesus. Theologically, they carry a different meaning- everyone of us, wherever and whenever we live, is implicated in his death inasmuch as he died for our sins, and to load that responsibility onto any

single group of people by reason of history or geography is just bad thinking and a denial of our own place.

### **Who was Judas?**

Who is Judas? The gospels tell us that he was one of the Twelve. The name "Iscariot" that he was either "from Kerioth" [a place] or "an assassin" (*sicarius*- lit. "dagger-man" a name used for the Zealots [Jewish sectarians using violence in the struggle to free Palestine from Roman rule]). We also hear that he was in charge of the 12's finances.

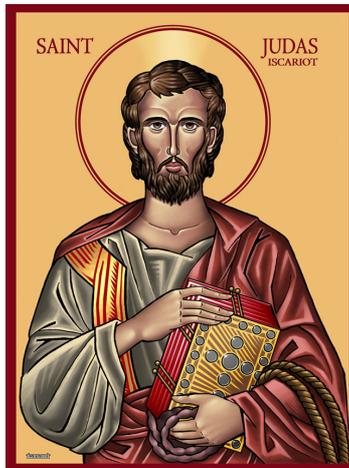
### **Did Judas "betray" Jesus?**

Many of our bibles use the word "betray" to describe what Judas did. But he is really only called a traitor once, in Luke's Gospel (6:16). On all the other occasions, the words used to describe what he does are more ambiguous. The word used, *paradidōmi*, means "to hand over". In 1 Cor 11:23, talks of "Jesus being handed over" - and it does not mention Judas, but might even imply God hands Jesus over. We should not, linguistically, use the language of "betrayal".

Note, too, that in Luke 22:3, "Satan entered into Judas" - which might suggest Judas did not have a choice. But this is a dangerous argument to use. After all *Genesis* 3 reminds us that we always remain accountable for our own actions, no matter who prompts them. Judas is not absolved because "the devil made him do it", any more than we are absolved from responsibility for our own actions by saying "X, Y or Z made me do it". Other reasons given for his actions include that he felt let down by Jesus when an expensive gift was used for anointing, not for helping the poor (Matthew 26:6-16). The less favourable spin is that this was only pretend indignation masking his own greed (added only in John 12:6).

That said, we need to remember that Judas has not always been given a bad press. The recently discovered Gospel of Judas is a stark reminder that some Christians have seen him more positively. And, depending on their way of thinking about God, this may only be fair.

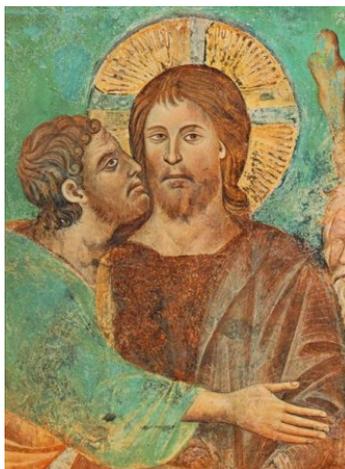
So what case could be made for **St Judas Iscariot**?



<http://www.testingpointdesign.com/communities/6/004/005/990/086/images/4515542376.jpg>

Some commentators have suggested that Judas did what Jesus wanted- and with Jesus' consent, handed him over to the authorities to provoke a confrontation, avoiding the potential strife that a public arrest might have caused.

This is further than I'd go-and it reads a lot into the text: you need to invent a lot of subtext to fit the bits together. Eventually, I don't think this works dramatically- it makes a mockery of the narrative drama of Gethsemane, and does not sit well with Jesus' own spiritual turmoil ("let this cup pass from me...Not my will, but yours, be done" etc). These are odd things to say if you are knowingly and deliberately provoking a confrontation. It also strips the text of any irony in the kiss, in which an act of honour turns into a shaming and insult culminating in Jesus' arrest:



<http://www.irfw.org/content/archives/judas.jpg>

This kind of interpretation is one that can be seen quite often in academic writing on the NT: the surface narrative reading of the texts is rejected for an ideological reason, or simply the desire to flog yet another book- and a more complex but less obvious interpretation put in its place. I always remain suspicious of theories which everyone else has been too dense to notice in the past 2000 years....

But the way we think of the whole of Jesus' mission is important here, and can give some justification for not condemning Judas. We need to think of the way that our descriptions of Jesus' death sometimes trip of the tongue: "Jesus *had* to die...." Well, if Jesus *had* to die, what is so wrong in Judas' actions- all he did was make happen what *had* to happen, for the good of us all! Surely he should be praised. Alternatively, if Jesus *had* to die in this way, and Judas then *had* to do what he did, why should we blame him for doing what *had* to happen irrespective of our moral judgment? We could argue that he was a mere cog in a larger process, or even positively doing what *had* to happen. Where's the fault in that? In the internal logic of the argument- none at all. My problem is where the argument starts.

By saying that Jesus *has* to die, and, by implication, that God *has* to let him die, we raise a major question. What is the "*has*" that God could not override? And what kind of God is unable to override something as ghastly as the crucifixion of his own Son? Thinking like this really diminishes God.

What's the alternative? Is there one? Yes, there is. It is that God always chooses, and there is a world of difference in choosing and being constrained. So, what we can say, and Paul uses the language of "humbling" to describe it, is that God chooses to set aside being God, to humble himself, and put himself amidst the vagaries of human action and behaviour. In this scheme, there is no "*has*", only the consequences of living out a life in obedience to the will of the Father, who also accepts the limits placed on Jesus' being human and subject to human whim and caprice. Thus both the Father and the Son place themselves at the mercy of humanity, to see how it will respond to their offer of themselves. And the answer is "with the usual selfishness and vindictiveness", but the process unleashes a new reality in which human actions no longer bring death, but are transformed to bring life. Yet in all this

there is a moral value and integrity to humility and obedience which creates a model of morality for us to follow, rather than the "*has*"s locking us into an unavoidable chain of cause and effect. We are told that what we do has the power to change and transform, not to keep us as victims.

### **Judas as one of the Disciples**

Whilst we can make much of Judas as the one whose actions lead directly to Jesus' arrest and death, we need also to be aware that the other disciples are not without their failings in what takes place. Certainly, there seems to be a qualitative difference in Judas' talking with the authorities and his planning to take them to where Jesus will be, but the other disciples do not come away spotless. All run away and desert Jesus. Even if what Judas does differs in the degree of intention, all let Jesus down. And we need to be careful that we don't introduce a tendency to water down sin, saying that the degree of sin is measured only by the degree of intention: is there really that much of a qualitative difference between a robbery which is planned or one which is spontaneous? Peter, the great founder of the church, blusters, brags and eventually denies Jesus three times:



[http://blogs.statravel.com.sg/photos/theboywholived/photos/57\\_11.jpg](http://blogs.statravel.com.sg/photos/theboywholived/photos/57_11.jpg)

The evangelists make this even more damning with their little note that Jesus looks at Peter. It has a striking similarity to what Judas does when he kisses Jesus in Gethsemane. In the ancient world, an insult was only an insult if it was delivered face to face; shouting at a retreating back was no real insult. The evangelists make it clear that Peter insults Jesus by his denial just as

effectively as the soldiers with the crown of thorns, and just as Judas had insulted him with a kiss.

Judas and Peter both, however, remind us of an important truth: whether deliberately or spontaneously, we are all involved in the handing over of Jesus, of letting him down. We all know that intuitively: after all we might well not be in church looking for a Saviour if we did not think we had done something from which we needed saving. Whether our actions follow the lines taken by Judas or the others, we stand at fault, and in need of healing and forgiveness.

### **The Consequences of Failure**

Peter and Judas are both left to face up to the shortcomings of their own behaviour. Whatever they might have thought they were going to achieve, they failed. Yet the consequences of their failure are very different. Judas returns the profit made from his actions and hangs himself; Peter goes out, weeps, and becomes a great witness for the Risen Lord. What is the difference?

We see it clearly in the title given to a painting by Edward Armitage- *The Remorse of Judas*:



The Remorse of Judas by Edward Armitage

[http://www.truthbook.com/images/site\\_images/Edward\\_Armitage\\_The\\_Remorse\\_of\\_Judas\\_525.jpg](http://www.truthbook.com/images/site_images/Edward_Armitage_The_Remorse_of_Judas_525.jpg)

Judas feels remorse for what he has done, Peter feels repentance. Consider the difference between these two feelings:

Remorse is "a gnawing distress arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs : self-reproach"<sup>1</sup>

While repentance is the act of repenting, that is:

*"intransitive verb*

1: to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life

2 a: to feel regret or contrition b: to change one's mind

*transitive verb*

1: to cause to feel regret or contrition

2: to feel sorrow, regret, or contrition for"<sup>2</sup>

There is a difference between the two. People who feel remorse turn in on themselves, and internalize what is going on, there is no relief, only stagnation, or what the dictionary entry expresses as "gnawing". There is no relief, no way out, and this is what prompts Judas to take his own life. Peter, on the other hand, experiences repentance, beautifully expressed by the evangelists as Breaking down or going out and weeping. His guilt and shame are not internalized, but released, and, as a result, he experience healing and new life not gnawing despair leading to suicide.

### **Lessons from Judas**

1. To remember that we too are implicated in Jesus' death, theologically, if not historically, and avoid blaming any smaller human group for his death.
2. To think about whether intentional sin is the only real sin.
3. To make sure our response to our own failures is repentance, not remorse. Repentant Christians can be as influential as Peter, not so the remorseful

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/remorse>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repenting>