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## **Holy Wednesday 2018**

John 13:21-32

'He immediately went out, and it was night'

John's gospel begins not at the beginning of the life of Jesus, but at the beginning of time. In John's prologue, we are told 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God', and straight away, we are introduced to Jesus as the light of the world 'in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it'.

We are not nearly aware as we used to be in past generations of sources of light. Because turning on an electric light illuminates a whole room instantaneously, we do not tend to think about where the light comes from and how far it reaches. We became very aware of that a few weeks ago in our house when we had a four hour power cut during the evening. Being a vicarage, we had a lot of candles, and we lit them in strategic places in the house. The children discovered that it was possible to read or play a game, but only if they were really pretty near to a candle, and arguments ensued about who got the prime spot, or the candle with the biggest flame. Everyone wanted to be near the light, because away from the light there was only the darkness and the cold.

In today's gospel reading, Judas went out and it was night. Set in the context of the gospel of John, that is a hugely significant sentence, not just because it is so atmospheric, but because of what is invoked by the darkness. Jesus is the light of the world and Judas deliberately absents himself from the light. He goes out, and it is night. Judas leaves the light of friendship and love between Jesus and the disciples, he leaves Jesus himself, the light of the world, and goes out into the night.

We are told twice that the devil put it into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus, first just before the foot-washing in John chapter 13, and then again in the verses we hear today. Jesus gives Judas a piece of bread, and it is at that moment that Satan enters into him. The moment at which Judas takes the bread from Jesus is the same moment at which the betrayal becomes inevitable.

And this image is a very clear depiction of what betrayal is. Judas receives bread from Jesus as his friend and follower, as one of Jesus' most trusted disciples, and then he disappears to betray him. Betrayal doesn't happen between strangers. It is the act of someone trusted by another who lets them down.

Christians have wondered through history about what Judas was really like. The most interesting depictions of Judas in films are the ones which try to see things from his point of view. Jesus Christ Superstar is perhaps the most obvious example, in which Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice give Judas the best part. It is Judas, not Jesus, who gets the best songs



Judas comes over as intelligent, sharp, and politically aware. He is a man of strategy and action, a natural leader who is not afraid to challenge Jesus but is also in his own way fiercely loyal. He abandons Jesus because he thinks Jesus is leading them all into death, literally. And of course he is right. When Judas leaves that final Passover meal and disappears into the night, it is about to become fatally dangerous to be a follower of Christ.

The film *Mary Magdalene*, which came out last week has a very different take on Judas. There, Judas' is characterised by innocence. He is young, and with a naivety about him which is not shared by the other disciples. He is also terribly sweet, the one who is kindest to Mary Magdalene, the only woman and the outsider, perhaps because he feels a bit of an outsider himself. In this film, Judas is convinced that Jesus is going to lead an army to defeat the Romans, and tells the Roman authorities where to find Jesus because he is trying to push Jesus to start the process by which he will become king. When Judas hangs himself in this film, there is a sense that he himself is a victim, someone who didn't understand and was unable to cope with the demands of following Jesus.

Neither story, *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Mary Magdalene*, let the audience get away with believing that Judas is evil. And by encouraging us to think about who Judas might have been and why he did what he did, they catapult us to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ. To follow Jesus is to live by faith.

That was the thing Judas couldn't do. He wasn't able to follow the light without knowing where it was going, and that, in the end, was why he turned on the light that led him.

Judas was not the only person who let Jesus down on his journey to the cross. Peter denied him three times before the cock crowed. Judas has been judged far more harshly by history than Simon Peter, and his crime probably was greater, but the most important difference between them was that Simon Peter was able to receive Jesus' forgiveness, whereas Judas was not. In the end, Judas was not excluded from the love of Jesus, he excluded himself.

At the back of this church is a font. It is placed deliberately at the door to be the first thing you see when you come in. And the font is a sign that God's love is given to us by grace. We Baptise babies before they have had a chance to do anything right or wrong, because his love is freely given. As we travel through life, we have the opportunity to accept or reject that love. And the font stands as a symbol that it is always there, always available for us to receive. Jesus loves us and he longs for our response. He must have longed for Judas too, longed to offer him forgiveness if only he had been able to receive it.

Amen