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Chancellor's Update

“Is it I?”

But when it was evening, he sat down with his twelve disciples. And whilst they were eating, he said: Amen I say to you, that one of you is about to betray me. And they being very much troubled, began every one to say: Is it I, Lord? But he answering, said: He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, he shall betray me. The Son of man indeed goeth, as it is written of him: but woe to that man by whom the Son of man shall be betrayed: it were better for him, if that man had not been born. And Judas that betrayed him, answering, said: Is it I, Rabbi? He saith to him: Thou hast said it. (Mt. XXVI: 20-25)

At this stage of the Gospel, Jesus has come to His last evening on Earth before his Resurrection. He has known all along that Judas would betray Him. As John wrote: “For Jesus knew from the beginning, who they were that did not believe, and who he was, that would betray him.” (Jn. VI: 65) Since the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Judas had sat with Him, ate with Him, and learned from Him as one of the Twelve. He was not suspected by His brethren, as John's account of the Last Supper shows us, and outwardly appeared to follow Jesus as faithfully as the rest (though, perhaps, not as much as Peter). Whether or not Judas had intended to *betray* Christ all along, we cannot know for sure. We do know that he did not “believe.” (Mk. XIV: 21) By the time he laid a kiss upon Jesus, however, his original intentions ceased to matter; he had made his final decision.

When Jesus announces His betrayal, His actions are notably conspicuous. He did not intend to stop the wicked man who would lead Him to death, yet He also expressed a terrible sentiment about Him, that “good were it for that man if he had never been born.” Unsurprisingly, both actions have been misinterpreted throughout history. These misinterpretations, if not corrected, however, can lead to disastrous conclusions about the theology of Christ. Many readers (and writers) have taken His submission to mean that He was subject to fate, that He was doomed by forces outside of His control. Many more have also used Christ's announcement to declare that Judas was secretly commissioned by Christ to hand Him over to the Sanhedrin. These minds have found it inconceivable that a Man would allow Himself to be killed, and, therefore, He must have been involved in a plot of some kind. This hypothesis became especially popular in the 20th century after the discovery of the “Gospel of Judas” in the 1970s, even though it had been condemned as a “fabricated work” as far back as 180 A.D. by St. Irenaeus (Encyclopedia of psychology and religion, Vol. 1, Spring, 2009). Furthermore, countless readers of the Gospel, including many Catholics, perceive Jesus' statements about Judas to be conceived in anger and wrath. They see it as unfair that Jesus, being God, should know that Judas would betray Him and yet still allow him to become an apostle. Should not Jesus have declined his application from the start? Is it just that God should allow a man to commit such a sin

in foreknowledge of his treachery? Let us examine each of these hypotheses in light of the writings of the Great Fathers.

Jesus does not show us weakness by His submission to betrayal; He shows us His power. Any reader of *A Tale of Two Cities* will recall the final sentence of the book and of the hero Carton, who decides to sacrifice his life standing in the place of Darnay: “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known.” How much more true this is for Our Lord as He goes to Calvary! The Lord says, “The Son of Man indeed goeth, as it is written of Him” (Mk. XIV: 21). As Theophylus explains, “The word here used, *goeth*, shows that the death of Christ was not forced but voluntary” (*Catena Aurea*, vol. II, p. 284, Baronius Press, 2009). In addition, Saint Remigius considers Jesus’ decision in light of His nature as the God-Man, as he says:

It belongs to human nature to come and go, Divine nature remains ever the same.

So because His human nature could suffer and die, therefore of the Son of Man it is well said that *he goeth*. He says plainly, *As it is written of Him*, for all that He suffered had been foretold by the Prophets (C.A., vol. I, p. 889).

Origen further considers the powers to which Christ subjected Himself, as he writes “[Christ meant] not, *By whom the Son of Man is betrayed*, but *through whom*, pointing out another, to wit, the Devil, as the author of His betrayal, Judas as the minister.” Note, however, that Origen is not excusing Judas with this observation, for he adds, “But woe also to all betrayers of Christ!” (Ibid. *em. added*)

The early Church Fathers had such a great insight into this dialogue that they even found compassion for the Disciples in Jesus’ words. The Lord’s news so thoroughly shocked the Disciples that each immediately showed his humility and asked, “Lord, is it I?” Bede writes of their reaction, saying “Although the eleven Apostles knew that they were meditating nothing against their Lord, yet notwithstanding because they trust more to their Master than themselves, fearing their own infirmities, they ask concerning a sin of which they had no consciousness” (C.A., vol. III, p.709). Be mindful, also, that the Lord has just said that *He goeth*, as Theophylus explained, to show His consent to His betrayal. Chrysostom points out that “This He said to comfort His disciples, that they might not think that it was through weakness that He suffered; and at the same time for the correction of His betrayer. And notwithstanding His Passion had been foretold, Judas is still guilty; and not his betrayal wrought our salvation, but God’s providence, which *used the sins of others to our profit*” (C.A., vol. I, p.889, *em. Added*). Furthermore, lest we might take their dejection as a sign of weak faith, Augustine (and many other of the Fathers) defends the Apostles saying, “Away then with the reasonings of the Stoics, who deny that perturbation of mind can come upon a wise man...It is good that the mind of the Christian may be perturbed, not by misery, but by pity” (CA., vol. IV, p.434). Indeed, it is fitting that the Apostles should be so grieved out of pity for the Lord (as should we all), for even the Lord took it upon Himself to be “troubled in spirit” (Jn. XIII:21) out of pity for Judas and his newly formed Church. (To be continued next month)

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