

**Spy Wednesday**  
*St Luke's, Tutshill, 2024*

*Isaiah 50:4-9a*  
*Hebrews 12: 1-3*  
*John 13:21-32*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

‘After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared,  
‘very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.’

We are now halfway through Holy Week, and the darkness is gathering. Over the years the church has attempted to impose a sort of historical chronology on our keeping of Holy Week: the problem with that is that the various biblical accounts don't exactly line up with each other in terms of exactly what events happen on each day of the week leading up to the crucifixion. Indeed the Gospels don't even quite agree about when the Last Supper takes place. So I don't think that trying to pin down precisely what Jesus was doing on each of the days of Holy Week, and in which order, is perhaps the most spiritually fruitful use of our time. What we do know is that several things did happen. Important things that begin to add layers of mystery and wonder to the story as we approach the Cross.

For quite a lot of its history, the church has called today Spy Wednesday, because traditionally amongst the readings set for today are the Gospel we have just heard, and sometimes also the preceding bit of the story which describes some of Judas's motivation for wanting to betray Christ. You remember the story? - Jesus is at supper with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and the other disciples. Mary pours oil over Jesus' feet, and wipes

them with her hair, and Judas is appalled by this waste of money. And we learn that he is appalled not because the money could have been used for something worthy, but because he was stealing from the common purse of the disciples. And seeing this profligate generosity, this wasteful act of love, pushes him to go to the chief priests and negotiate a fee for betraying Jesus.

And tomorrow evening when we gather here for our Maundy Thursday service, that service ends in silence and shadow, as we are invited to wait with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane - and I hope you might feel able to wait for a little bit, even if not for the whole time - because of course what happens at the end of that period of prayer and silence in the Garden of Gethsemane is that Judas arrives with the soldiers, kisses Jesus, and therefore identifies him as the one who needs to be arrested. He fulfils his contract as the Spy in the camp. Therefore the title for today: Spy Wednesday.

St Augustine reminds us that throughout history the church has been made up of Marys and Judases, because in those two characters in the Holy Week Story we actually find, if you like, two potential aspects of our own character. There is the part of us which wants to pour oil on our Saviour's feet, to overflow in abundant love for him, to give everything, to give the best in worship and adoration. But there is also the worst part of us, the part of us that is selfish and focused firstly on our own interests, our own self-preservation, the part of us that really does not want to wait with Christ in the garden, but wants action, wants to be busy, wants to be driving our own story forward.

Pius Pasch, a great priest and theologian of the last century, writes, ‘in everyone's heart, my own too, there dwell two souls: a Judas-soul and a Mary-soul. The former is the cause of Jesus' suffering, it is always ready to apostasize, always ready to give

the traitor's kiss. Are you full master over this Judas-soul within you? Your Mary-soul is a source of comfort to Christ in his suffering. May [this holy season]... bring victory over the Judas-soul and strengthen the Mary-soul within our breasts.'

The monks of what is now Durham Cathedral, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, had an extraordinary ritual that they used to do on Maundy Thursday evening, before the stripping of the church, called the Judas cup ceremony. After the Holy Communion service that evening, but before they stripped all of the decoration out of the church and waited in the darkness of Gethsemane, they would all go down to a little chapel in the crypt where there was a chalice filled with water, and etched into the silver of the chalice was Judas's face. And each monk in turn would take the chalice, drink from it, and as they did so they would see their own face reflected in Judas Iscariot's face. The purpose of that rather extraordinary ritual was to remind them in a very visual and inescapable way that as we move into the darkest part of Holy Week we have to face our own demons. We have to face the Judas in each of us, and recommit, next time, to at least try to anoint the Lord's feet with our love and tears, rather than betraying him.

And you will have noticed in the gospel reading this afternoon that we have that repeated theme of St John in particular, that of the night. Let me just read verse 30 again: 'so, after receiving the piece of bread, [Judas] immediately went out. And it was night.'

The night, in the Bible, is where the darkest things happen, but also course the most wonderful and mysterious. The sky turns black on Good Friday when Jesus dies. Judas disappears into the night to do his deeds. But it is also at night that Jesus is born. It is at night that shepherds hear a choir of angels. It is under the

cover of darkness that Nicodemus is brave enough to visit Jesus. And it is at night that the stone is rolled aside from the tomb, and all of the fears and inadequacies and betrayals that the world can throw at Christ are scattered in the light of Easter.

The space we occupy between now and Saturday night up in the churchyard at Tidenham is ambiguous space. We are both Mary and Judas. And we are given this time to sit with that reality, to face it, and pray, once again, for the wholeness and healing which is found only at the foot of the Cross.

Amen.