

JOHN 12:1-11  
DISCIPLESHIP – GONE WRONG!

I grew up with a book of *Cautionary Tales for children* by Hilaire Belloc. I'm not sure how many I could read in public now, but I've found one! *The Lion*. There is also the story of Rebecca who would slam doors, and who by slamming doors would startle, annoy and irritate all of the adults; but who by slamming doors drew a marble bust of Abraham down on her head; none of these stories ended well; they are very Victorian. There is the story of Jim who was well-looked after with all kinds of cakes, jam and ham for tea, but on a trip to the zoo ran away from his child-minder and was eaten by a lion called Ponto. There is the story of Henry King who chewed string and wouldn't eat his tea; it didn't end well for Henry King! I must have read this book a lot because it is held together with sellotape. Cautionary tales were meant to be funny; they are somewhat satirical, making people sit up and look at way they think about life and I suppose cautionary tales are meant to make you think before you bang doors, run away from the child-minder or eat string. I don't know if it had any impact on making me a better person! Perhaps these are just a bit of fun!

The story of Judas is a Bible cautionary tale. We've been looking at discipleship through the eyes of Jesus' disciples and have looked at Peter, Andrew, James and John and have discovered all kinds of things about being disciples of Jesus in our world. Faith is a journey of discovery, something that we learn and it grows within us, as it did with Peter. Being an Andrew-type disciple is about being dependable in the background, quietly connecting other people with Jesus, without making a fuss and without trying to be someone else and some of you have warmed to that idea. James and John learned to serve humbly after asking Jesus for the most important seats in His kingdom; discipleship is cross-shaped as the Sons of Thunder, these fiery, feisty brothers, learned that following Jesus meant being humble and serving others. There are all kinds of ways in which we can shape our lives as disciples from the lives of those who followed Jesus first. Today's is a more cautionary tale.

Judas Iscariot is a different story altogether. There were two men among the twelve called Judas and they are always distinguished in two ways. First of all, this Judas is given his surname, Iscariot, whenever he is mentioned; secondly he is usually connected with the betrayal of Jesus on the night before Jesus died. Judas Iscariot was man who gave Jesus up into hands of His enemies. What is there about Judas' story from which we can learn? Not all of Judas' story is about betrayal; that is the end of the story, but there is more to it than that. Betrayal was not a sudden outburst of hatred for Jesus, as if the wheels came off all at once in the most dramatic way; betrayal was the end of something else that had been going on in Judas and the big crisis was the climax of lots of small choices that had allowed him to drift away from Jesus in the months leading up to the cross. Some of that insight comes from the story we read in John chapter 12.

The scene is set at a dinner party given in Jesus' honour. Is it in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus? We imagine so because they are all there and this happens just after Jesus has raised Lazarus from being dead (see chapter 11). So the mood is happy, full of gratitude: here is a family who are immensely grateful to Jesus for what He has done in bringing Lazarus back to life. There is another mood outside: dark clouds are gathering because some outside want Jesus out of the way and want Lazarus out of the way too because the crowds are flocking to see both, and to follow Jesus because of the great things He has done. Miracles attract attention, but sometimes the wrong kind of attention! These dark clouds will gather inside too.

Mary's heart is full of gratitude for what Jesus has done and she wants to show it. She takes, perhaps the most expensive thing she has, a pint of expensive perfumed oil, and breaks the bottle over Jesus' feet; she wipes His feet with her hair and "*the house...*" (John 12:3) It is an act of love and devotion, a demonstration of her faith in the most extravagant way and it was beautiful to see. But, Judas is not about to let this pass: "*But one...*" (John 12:4,5) There is a complaint, an objection from Judas and on the surface, we can see that he has a point; we have some sympathy for his point of view in a society at a time when there was a great deal of abject poverty and many people struggled to find food. There is some sense in what he says, perhaps. But it is sad, though, that he should blankly miss the extravagant generosity of Mary. Jesus didn't miss it; He fully appreciated it: "*leave her...*" (John 12:7f)

John tells us more about Judas: "*He did...*" (John 12:6) Any sympathy we might have had for Judas' point of view about the poor is gone with this comment. Judas was the treasurer of the disciples, it would seem. He had a skill in looking after money; he is given this position of trust and Jesus must have recognised these gifts, these traits in Judas, that he could do this and was trustworthy. But something has happened since then; something else has entered Judas' soul; greed has taken over his heart. He's been helping himself from the money bag! If he had been given the chance to sell the perfume and make lots of money, he could have had a field day. Judas is not a victim of circumstances. Greed has filled his soul; he has made lots of choices to steal, and has started to drift away from Jesus. He no longer loved Jesus heart and soul, but his greed was taking over. This led to disillusion and disappointment with the way Jesus was going; the cross is not the right way to become rich, and Judas tried to find another way. He agreed to betray Jesus for money, 30 silver coins was the price for his betrayal. Judas would later regret his betrayal and take his own life.

Why did Jesus choose Judas if He knew this was going to happen? There are no games being played here. We have to think that Jesus' call to Judas, His choice of Judas, is genuine. Jesus sees Judas as a disciple with potential to follow, grow and learn and be the right kind of man. He saw the potential in Judas in the same way as He saw the potential in the others. But just as there is potential for good in all of the disciples, there is also the potential to get it wrong and always real choices to make; Judas made real choices, but wrong choices. These small choices about the money bag made it easier to make the big choice to betray. The Gospels are all written looking back, so when Judas is mentioned as the one who would betray, that is written after the fact; maybe Jesus knew the end from the beginning, but it made no difference to the genuine call He made to Judas to be a disciple; did He hope that grace would prevail?

"There are few people who deliberately and in a moment turn their backs on God; there are many who day by day drift farther and farther away from Him." (Wm Barclay) There are some people who have been Christians, sometimes very public Christians, who have declared that they no longer believe; Jonathan Edwards would be one, but for more people the process is a gradual drift away from faith and from ways that once were important to them. Something else has got into their hearts and has become more important than faith and the practice of that faith. Few people come to me and tell me that they are giving up church; but more often I see people coming to church less and less often and when they used to be here every Sunday, now we see them only occasionally and then not at all. They have drifted away from Jesus and something else has got into their soul to take over. It might be something that, on the surface, seems good and commendable, but it has led them to drift away from Jesus and so make it possible to give up their faith altogether when some crisis occurs.

That's why I say this is a cautionary tale, because we need to take care that this drift doesn't happen. Be careful about Sundays and make sure that there is time for Church; not because church is be-all-and-end-all, but because being here feeds our faith, keeps us in touch with Jesus and with our fellow Christians; we underestimate church at our peril! Be careful about the way we live; there are little choices that seem to be unimportant, but that get in the way of faith, and can build up to leave a door open for bigger crisis choices later. Sin crouches at our door and will take any opportunity to drive a wedge between us and Jesus. On the other hand, Peter writes to young Christians about ways to counter this: "*Make every effort...*" (2 Peter 1:5ff) Build on the faith; strengthen faith with these other qualities; what we make stronger will not drift! Be careful; get this right; make the small choices right choices.

Devotion and gratitude – here's the contrast. Mary! We are inspired by Jesus, or should be! She was devoted to Jesus because of what He had done for her. Easter is just around the corner for us; the time when we remember the cross and that Jesus died; we remember the resurrection and God raised Jesus. The heart of our faith is Jesus crucified and raised and what God has done for us by this crucified Saviour, and risen Lord. Do we have this sense of gratitude? Jesus has done great things for us! Jesus has died to save us; Jesus is raised to live forever; we have forgiveness and hope. Is there gratitude to God that He should do all of this for us? The counterpoint to Judas and his greed is Mary and her generosity, even her extravagance. Devotion and gratitude keep us close to Jesus, help us remember how He has loved us, what He has done for us. This matters more than we know. It matters that our hearts are full of devotion and gratitude; it matters that we give no space to greed or anything else that will make us drift away. Devotion and gratitude will keep us close to Jesus and will touch other lives too! There really is no better way!