

Spy Wednesday Sermon, Christ Church Vienna

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Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

In the Church of St Anne in Jerusalem, is one of my favourite statues. In it, St. Anne is teaching a young Virgin Mary to pray the Shema, the words with which I opened. This prayer has served as a regular reminder to Jews and Christians that there is only one God worthy of worship; but the Hebrew word 'shema' is about more than just using ears. It implies action. Our readings this morning prompt us to consider our own obedience, to re-affirm our commitment to following and serving only Him, and to prioritize Him over the many other idols that exist in our lives and society. Put bluntly, our readings offer a challenge: on whose side are we on? On God's side, following the example of the obedient servant, or do we find ourselves with Judas, finding other things to worship? Is God first in our lives?

In our reading from Isaiah 50 this morning we are given an image of an obedient servant. 'I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward, I listen as those who are taught.' This is in contrast to the disobedience of Israel that has been set out in the previous three verses:

Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold.

This analogy of marriage is a common one in the Old Testament prophets, most notably perhaps the Book of Hosea.

The obedience of the servant is set against the disobedience of the people. The servant hears that there is only one Sovereign God, and makes that clear from his actions, not falling into the idolatry that was rife among the Israelites.

The servant songs offer a glimmer of hope, of vindication, in the face of suffering. Israel was in despair; the First Temple, the holiest place, the pinnacle of creation, the house of God had been destroyed, and God's people were about to be driven out into exile in Babylon.

The historical context of the servant songs is worthy of exploration in its own right, but from the inception of Christianity, Christians have interpreted these servant songs as looking forward to Christ.

The parallels between the language of the servant song in Isaiah and the events of Holy Week are too striking to miss. 'I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.' Indeed, Christ is the model of perfect obedience to the will of His Father. He, like the servant, does not turn away from suffering, from self-sacrifice, from following the word of God, but embraces it, faces persecution and adversity.

The language of obedience is problematic in the twenty-first century. We are, we are told, free to be(come) whoever or whatever we want to be. The word slave or servant brings with it connotations of exploitation, of maltreatment, and we have traumatic events of history to blame for that.

Slavery to Christ is not like that. Jesus gives us the familiar image of a yoke in the Gospels: 'My yoke is easy, my burden is light.' Obedience to God is life-giving, life-affirming. In His service is perfect freedom. God's desire for obedience, unlike many colonialists, did not lead to the servants' bloodshed, but to the bloodshed of the Master on the Cross, out of love for the people whom He came to save.

Judas in our Gospel reading continues to worship other gods. He cannot fathom that following Christ means perfect freedom, and looks for other ways to achieve freedom for himself:

First, money. Matthew's Gospel makes explicit that a bribe of 30 pieces of silver is behind his treachery. John doesn't, but hints at Judas' selfishness in the previous chapter. Judas' frustration at the copious amount of perfume being poured on Jesus' feet, John tells us, is not borne of concern for the poor, but of greed.

Any number of motivations could have been behind Judas' betrayal: his own reputation, perhaps, or a sense that the other disciples were preferred by Jesus. Iscariot could well mean that Judas is a geographical outsider... a non-Galilean perhaps. An act of money-making that Judas thought would bring him freedom only traps him more and more in the pains of guilt and sin. Serving money does not bring freedom – we become trapped as we seek to acquire more and more.

Judas issues a warning to us. We can live alongside Jesus. We can share at His table. We can pray with and to Him. And we can still be tempted. Sin still knocks at our door. No matter how many times we hear that God is one, we can still, with Judas, find other things, e.g. money, status, reputation, pleasure, to worship.

We too can lose sight of our mission, our calling with Christians throughout the ages and across the world to worship one God, to strip away all idols and other things that we might want to worship or put in His place. We are offered a warning to remain vigilant, not to become complacent, of the need constantly to evaluate where we are in our relationship with God, is He really first place in our lives, is the LORD alone God and one in our lives?