

Matthew 26:17-30 // Maundy Thursday Communion Service

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[0 : 00] Jesus said, truly I tell you, one of you will betray me. They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, surely you don't mean me, Lord.

! Jesus replied, the one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it's written about him.

But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he'd not been born.

And then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?

Jesus answered, you said so. And while they were eating, Jesus took bread. And when he'd given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, take and eat.

This is my body. And then he took a cup. And when he'd given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, drink from it, all of you.

[1 : 13] This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.

And when they'd sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Good. Let me just check.

It is on. That's excellent. Good. Good evening, everyone. Let's pray as we come to think about this passage that Malcolm's just read to us. Let's pray together. Father in heaven, we pray, please, that this evening you will open our eyes to see more clearly who we are and who Jesus is.

Whatever the concerns of the day, please give us clarity of thought and help us to see and appreciate all that Jesus has done for us.

We ask these things in his name. Amen. You'll find it really helpful to have the Bible open in front of you. Please keep your Bibles open at page 996.

[2 : 39] As we look briefly at this extraordinary episode, it's Passover. Jewish people from all over the world have gathered in Jerusalem to remember the Exodus, the great rescue that took them as a nation from slavery to being God's people.

They do it every year. It's just part of the calendar, part of the national routine. And the Passover meal is right at the heart of that remembering.

They eat lamb with unleavened bread to remind them of how on the night that all the firstborn died in Egypt, death did not visit the households of the Israelites who were instructed to sacrifice a lamb, paint its blood on the doorposts, and eat together a hurried meal with unleavened bread.

Sacrificial death led to life and freedom for them as a nation back at the beginning. And that drama was replayed every year in the Passover meal, just part of the national routine, a bit like Christmas and Easter for us, which is pretty much, I think, what Jesus' disciples are expecting.

Something normal, something routine. Just look at verse 17. They say to Jesus, Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?

[4 : 10] But there is nothing routine about this Passover meal. Because Jesus speaks the most startling words. First, words about them.

Secondly, words about him. Concerning them, his friends, he says, One of you will betray me.

Concerning him, their friend, he says, This meal, the one we do every year, is actually all about me and my death.

Betrayal by a friend and sacrificial death are intimately entwined in this extraordinary meal. And Jesus' words highlight two things that I think are really very hard to grasp adequately.

Two things that people find almost unthinkable. One of them is a dreadful thing. One of them is a wonderful thing. We're going to start with the dreadful thing.

The alarming capacity of human beings for evil. Look at verse 21.

[5 : 28] Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me. And this word is met with incomprehension, incredulity. One after another they say, Not me, not me, surely not me.

It's unthinkable. We're your friends. You've chosen us. They all say exactly the same thing. One of them, of course, already knows differently from the others.

Verse 25. Surely not me. Same words, but different intention. Because Judas has already decided that it will be him.

Look back to verse 14. Then one of the twelve, Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and asked, What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?

At the meal, these words, the same words everybody else uses, surely not me, are words meant to make him look like everyone else. But he's not like everyone else.

[6 : 39] Surely not me. It's such a normal human reaction, isn't it? Evil, it's out there somewhere. Betraying a friend, that's a long way away.

Betraying Jesus, unthinkable. not a St. Silas person, surely not one of us. Not one of the preachers, not one of the staff, not one of the home group leaders, surely not.

but one of the people, but one of the people, one of the people, one of the privileged twelve, did. Judas is a very perplexing character.

What drives him exactly? Well, I think we get possibilities in the Bible, but not certainties. Elsewhere in the Gospels, especially in John's Gospel, he is noted to be very interested in money.

And it's quite striking that his decision to betray Jesus, in verse 14, follows on directly from a meal in a house in Bethany, verse 6, in which a woman anoints Jesus with an eye-wateringly expensive jar of perfume, provoking outrage around the table.

[7 : 54] Look at verse 9. That could have been sold for a poverty-relieving sum of money, they all say. Again, in John's Gospel, Judas is flagged up as being particularly outraged by that.

And Jesus says to them all, verse 11, I'm worth it. The poor you'll always have with you, but you won't always have me.

When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial, and she'll be remembered forever for that action. What she did is totally fitting.

I and my coming death are very, very precious. I wonder, was that the moment of financial extravagance?

Was that the final straw that flipped Judas, the money lover, into thinking that this has just all gone too far and something must be done? It's a possibility.

[8 : 56] And what did he think the result of the betrayal would be? Well, interestingly, in chapter 27, when Jesus is condemned and handed over to the Roman authorities, at the point when it's obviously going to lead to his death, Judas is filled with remorse, tries to give the money back to distance himself from the proceedings, eventually killing himself, as if he's unable to countenance the idea that his action the night before was part of what's now happening.

Unthinkable. Unbearable. Now, we cannot be absolutely certain why he did it or what he thought it would accomplish. The thing that's certain is that he did it and it was a key step on the route to Jesus' death.

Interestingly, the word Jesus uses here in verse 21, one of you will betray me, the word means to hand over.

It's not necessarily a negative word, but in this gospel, nearly all the uses of this word are profoundly negative. To hand someone over in a hostile manner to hostile people with deadly consequences.

John the Baptist's arrest earlier on is described with the same word. He is handed over. Jesus warns his disciples that when he's gone, they will be handed over to hostile people.

[10 : 25] Even brother will hand over brother to death. And repeatedly, Jesus has taught them that he is going to be handed over. Chapter 20, verse 18, for example, we're going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and teachers of the law.

They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. No matter what his motives or what he thought would happen, Judas was the first link in that chain of handing over.

Now, there is a uniqueness about this particular episode. Of course, by the next day, everyone in Jerusalem is calling for Jesus to be crucified.

But there is something unique about this. And in the moment, we'll think about how this betrayal was part of God's sovereign plan for our salvation. But that uniqueness can so easily make us think, make me think, that this kind of betrayal could never be my problem.

Me? Surely not me. I'm a disciple. I've turned to Jesus. Do I have to bother worrying about this kind of possibility? But right from the first mention of the 12 in this gospel in chapter 10, Matthew tells his readers that the betrayer is one of that very privileged group, the most privileged group of human beings ever.

[12:01] He's an apostle. He's seen all the miracles. He's heard all the teaching. He's been right at the heart of the ministry. One of the 12.

It's very unlikely that Matthew's emphasis on one of the 12 is in this book so that people reading this book could say to themselves, not my problem.

Now, the only clues we have in the gospels about Judas are to do with his love of money. Such an ordinary-looking thing, isn't it? We don't know what the small steps of compromise might have been that led to his reaction after the meal at Bethany.

But we do know that this blackest of human evils, the handing over of the Son of God, is done by an otherwise unremarkable-looking person with massive privileges.

And it ought to make us, oughtn't it, pray for ourselves and one another, if we're followers of Jesus, that we won't turn away. And it ought to make us very careful about complacency and compromise.

[13:18] It's possible to be aware of ways in which we've begun to drift away from Jesus and yet think that wholesale rejection could never be my problem.

That mindset doesn't quite fit with this episode, does it? So here's the first unthinkable thing, a terrible thing, the alarming capacity human beings have for evil.

But intertwined with this terrible thing is a very wonderful thing. A second, almost unthinkable thing, the extraordinary lengths that God has gone to to forgive evil.

Judas is a fully responsible human being and yet God's intimate involvement in all the details of Jesus' betrayal are woven right through this passage.

Let's touch on those details quickly. Look at verse 18, please. Here are the instructions Jesus gives to his disciples. The teacher says, my appointed time is near.

[14:32] I'm going to celebrate the Passover at your house. According to Jesus, there is an appointed time that governs all the events that are unfolding here.

Or look at verse 24. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to the man who betrays the Son of Man.

Judas' actions are terrible. They will receive what they deserve, but they're not outside the umbrella of God's sovereign plan. Jesus is actively going according to a path that Scripture says belongs to him.

And then, of course, there's verse 26. While they were eating, Jesus took bread and when he'd given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, take and eat.

This is my body. Then he took a cup and when he'd given thanks, he gave it to them saying, drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

[15:38] I tell you, I will not drink from the fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. Now, the blessing of bread and cups is a routine part of the Passover meal, but there is absolutely nothing routine about what Jesus does here.

He grabs hold of this meal, a meal that reminds of a great rescue in the past and says, all of that history is a massive national signpost pointing towards what I'm going to do tomorrow.

All of that happened to make sense of this one thing, the significance of my death. Now, folks, the enormity of this move, I think, is very hard to grasp.

We do not have many great national memorial days as a nation, do we? I think Remembrance Sunday is probably as good as we get. So just imagine for a moment that the next time we get to Remembrance Sunday and there's a ceremony at the Cenotaph in London and all the dignitaries are there and the politicians and the royalty, just imagine that the person reading the Ode of Remembrance instead of saying, at the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them, instead says, all of their sacrifice is really a signpost to what I am going to do tomorrow.

This is like that. the Passover, it's all about me and what's written about me and what I'm going towards.

[17:37] Now, unsurprisingly, these few verses are absolutely loaded with ideas from the Old Testament. Look at verse 28. That phrase, the blood of the covenant, comes from Exodus 24 where Israel enter into covenant relationship with God at Mount Sinai.

Verse 28 again, the idea of one death for many reminds strongly of Isaiah 53 where a suffering servant makes atonement for many people.

But I'm going to focus briefly on one connection that's sometimes a bit neglected here. Look at verse 28 again. This is my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Four things. Blood poured out for sinners for their forgiveness. There is only one passage in the Old Testament where those four things come together and it's in Leviticus chapter 4 in the instructions for the Old Testament sin offering.

A sacrifice. Let me read just a tiny sample from the end of Leviticus 4. The priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar and pour out the rest of the blood.

[19:04] The priest will make atonement for them for the sin that they've committed and they will be forgiven. Blood poured out for sinners for their forgiveness.

There are many Old Testament threads that Jesus weaves into this Passover meal as he says the Son of Man goes as the Old Testament has written of him.

But one of the most prominent of these threads is that he positions himself as the sin offering.

Jesus himself is consciously walking towards being himself a sacrifice for human sins.

Isn't it almost unthinkable that he should respond to the sort of human evil we see in this chapter in that sort of way?

This passage displayed for us two almost unthinkable things. We thought first about the alarming capacity human beings have for evil. These words speak volumes about the extraordinary lengths that God has gone to to forgive human evil.

[20:24] And this is very much in line with Matthew's purpose. Right back in chapter 1 Joseph is instructed in a dream that the child Mary is going to bear is to be called Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

And at this extraordinary meal betrayal by a friend and sacrificial death human evil and divine love are intimately entwined.

Here at this point when human evil is displayed in all its horribleness is displayed also the lengths that God will go to to rescue people from it.

So I cannot come away from this passage complacent saying to myself surely not me. But it does not matter who we are what we've done what baggage we bring how great our failures are Jesus came to bring forgiveness for those things.

We can come away from this passage casting all our confidence on the kindness of this magnificent one who went as it was written of him to be an offering for the sins of the world.

[21:58] Well let's pray together shall we? Just a moment to reflect on what God has said to us and then I'll lead us in prayer. Father in heaven these things are capacity for evil and the lengths that you've gone in order to forgive it are very hard for us to grasp.

We pray that you will enlarge our understanding of both of these things. That you will keep us from complacency and help us to hope only in your son and what he has done on our behalf.

these things we pray in his name. Amen.