

Trees of Tragedy and Triumph

“He went and hanged himself.” (Matt 27:5)

This is not a very promising text. I can hardly conclude this sermon with the words of Jesus, “Go and do likewise”. The recent tragic deaths of Amy Whitehouse and Whitney Houston, however, suggest that it is possible to become so severely damaged by fame, fortune and the expectations of others that untimely death follows almost as a natural consequence.¹

Within a consumer celebrity culture, many put themselves under intense pressure to succeed, make money, and to climb to the top of the tree. Jack Higgins, a very successful thriller writer, was once asked what it is like when you finally make it. He said, “When you get to the top, there is nothing there.”

Judas, the disciple, is an enduring enigma. As far as we can ascertain he was high up in our Lord’s affections. He was probably lying next to Jesus at the last supper. How else could Jesus have acknowledged him as the betrayer without the other disciples hearing (Matt.26:25)? It has been suggested that Jesus not only gave him the choicest morsel of food but may even have placed it in his mouth (John 13:30). It was love’s last appeal, but tragically Judas had drunk so much darkness into his soul that this token of love was received as wrath. None of the other disciples suspected his dark designs as he left the upper room on the night of betrayal. He was a trusted companion, sent on a special mission by Jesus (John13:29-30). Alan Mann thinks that many today unconsciously take Judas as their role

¹ . Amy Winehouse was found dead on 23 July 2011, and Whitney Houston on 11 February 2012.

model. “He typifies the post-industrial self . . . the intimacy Judas craves is purely for his own satisfaction and that others are expendable.”²

Matthew, in his Gospel, invites us to consider the two ways of discipleship. There is the narrow road leading to life, and there is the broad road—which Judas takes—leading to destruction (Matt 7:13). We have the same choice. We can like the priests, in the final chapter of Matthew, hide from reality and live a lie (28:11-15); or we can worship Jesus and go as obedient disciples to live in his Kingdom presence.

Both Jesus and Judas die “hanging on a tree” (Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29). In the eyes of the law both are cursed. The contrast between Jesus and Judas could not have been greater. The life and death of Judas demonstrates the “down-side” of God’s justice, enacted in wrath. The death of Jesus demonstrates the “up-side” of God’s justice, enacted in love.

Judas is the antithesis of Jesus.³ While the Jesus narrative is one of coherence, his is a narrative of incoherence. Judas slips into the “nothingness” of isolation because he cannot maintain relationships. Jesus takes “nothingness” away from people, absorbing it into his own relational identity with the Father. Judas dies because he has based his whole life on an illusion and, losing all sense of self worth, suffers from chronic shame. He cannot confess, because confession would sink him further into shame. He cannot pray, because self-absorption has robbed him of the capacity to know anyone other than himself. He has distanced himself from the corporate world of relationships to such an extent that, when Jesus offers him a token of love, he turns away. The life and death of Judas is a negation of at-onement. He kills himself because he knows he is already dead. His suicide is the ultimate act

². Mann, 125.

³. I am greatly indebted to Alan Mann’s reflections on these respective narratives of coherence and incoherence. (Mann, 107-131).

of self-harming in a desperate attempt to feel something. Jesus and Judas represent two polarities; one walks the path to heaven, the other the path to hell! We have the same choice.

In Dante Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy* there is this inscription over the doorway of hell.

*Justice it was that moved my great creator. Divine omnipotence created me and highest wisdom joined with primal love.*⁴

Dante is suggesting that divine justice, power, wisdom, and love have created hell. Jesus and Judas illustrate the inseparable relationship between light and its shadow. Some argue that Dante's inscription points to the choices people make since love gives us the independence to freely decide on either path. I believe God is more directly involved. God, because of his love for the world, makes himself accountable for the "nothingness"—which is the hell of his "non-creating". Judas chose the path of "non-creating". In his quest for absolute power he copied the fall of the angels and dies on a tree. Jesus chose the path of creating. In his quest for justice he is obedient unto death and dies on a tree.

Jesus does not climb the tree like Judas; he is lifted up. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is not only lifted up on the cross, but he is raised up in resurrection. His cross becomes the new tree of life—not a tree of death.

Ours is still a world where people do irreparable damage to themselves, and to others, in their struggle to climb to the top. Ours is a world where people—like Judas—embrace the darkness of nothingness and self-destruct. In our world of suicides, violence, tragedy and despair, it is not easy retaining a sense of hope.

⁴. Wilson, *Dante*, 209.

There was a remarkable woman who lived many years ago in Norwich at a time when violence and death stalked the streets. For fifteen years she struggled to understand a vision she had seen of the crucified Christ. At last she received an answer. It is the secret of life. Do you want to know what your Lord meant? Know well that love was what he meant. Who showed you this? Love. What did he show? Love. Why did he show it to you? For love. Hold fast to this and you will know and understand more of the same'.⁵

Found in my 'The Wrath of God Satisfied?'

⁵. Julian, LT.86, 179.