

“The Master’s Mastery”
Mark 14:12-22 (NRSV)

As beautiful as Mary’s anointing of Jesus was (recorded in Mark 14:1-11, and I’ll get back to that story a few weeks from now), **it was funereal** – she was anointing Jesus’ body “beforehand for its burial” (14:8). From that anointing on, **a palpable gloom settled over the remaining days of Jesus’ life**. That gloom darkened as **Judas secretly made arrangements to deliver Jesus to the priests** when there would be no Passover crowd to interfere (14:10-11).

Some scholars believe that from here on matters simply escaped Jesus’ control, so much so that **he became a helpless victim**. **Albert Schweitzer**, in his famous book, The Quest for the Historical Jesus (1959), which is a study of various attempts throughout history to write the life of Christ, gave eloquent voice to this opinion:

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Soon after that comes Jesus and, in the knowledge that he is the coming Son of Man, lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn, and crushes him. Instead of bringing the eschatological conditions [or last things] about, he has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of [humankind] and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still (p. 370-371).

According to Schweitzer, Jesus Christ overplayed his hand and, as a result, was mangled like a doll in the merciless gears of history where he flops helplessly, still. **Admittedly, it’s a powerful image: Jesus Christ wedged in the grinding mills of history**, his best-laid plans gone awry. **But it is utterly false**. In reality, Scripture shows us that **Jesus wielded profound command from the beginnings of his ministry to his final journey to the cross**. In spite of the disciples’ protestations, **Jesus chose** to set his face to go to Jerusalem, and although he might have willed to walk another way (witness the poignant scene of his struggle over this matter in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane) **he, again, chose** to submit to his Father’s will and go all the way to the cross.

The Master's mastery of the dark times in his life should give us great hope during the dark times that we all face as a natural part of living.

1. The Master's control over Passover arrangements (Mark 14:12-16).

We're introduced to **the mastery of Jesus in the last days of his life by his premeditated arrangements for the celebration of the Passover**, a most important festival for all believing Jews. That he'd given the Passover meal much thought is evidenced by his ready, detailed instructions to the disciples when they asked him what they were going to do for this annual observance. Mark records:

So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there" (14:13-15).

Evidently, **Jesus had previously made arrangements** with a homeowner in Jerusalem to use his upper chamber for the Passover. Perhaps the man was also a follower because he readily agreed to use the **coded action** of one of his servants to direct the two disciples, likely Peter and John, according to Luke's Gospel (22:8), to an out of the way, "large room upstairs" (14:15). Customarily, only women carried water pots, while men bore water skins. Thus **a man carrying a water pot was as unusual as a man carrying a purse!** Peter and John easily spotted the servant, followed him, met the owner, and were quietly ushered to this prearranged "upper room." I remember going up some steps and visiting a room just like this when we were in Jerusalem with a group of pilgrims from Calvin Church. It was plain and simple, but it was large, and it seemed just right for the occasion.

But, why did Jesus pay all this attention to detail?

First, because **it hid the location from Jesus' enemies** who were out to get him, and more particularly **from Judas Iscariot**, so it would've be impossible for him to have had enough time to reveal the location to them. Judas would have only learned of it when he arrived along with the other disciples. So **at least for a little while**, Jesus may have reasoned, **they'd be out of harm's way**. At least then there would be time to say what needed to

be said, and to do what needed to be done. (John's Gospel records for us at great length what the "upper room conversation" (John Stott) might have included in chapters 13-17.) The other disciples may have been oblivious to Judas' intentions, but Jesus knew all too well what Judas was going to do.

The second reason Jesus took such great care to obtain this room is that **he wanted to control the already charged atmosphere of the Passover meal.** This upcoming meal was **easily the most frequently celebrated festival in the world** – even by then it had been observed for over 1,500 years. As a devout Jew, Jesus would've known what the meal represented: **it was a celebration of God's liberation of his people from slavery.** It was a night when believing Jews reminded themselves of God's gracious intervention as he led them safely out of Egypt, and when, as a result, they hoped for God's intervention in the future. The ancient institution of this meal says of the Passover: "That was for the LORD a night of vigil, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. The same night is a vigil to be kept for the LORD by all the Israelites throughout their generations" (Exod. 12:42). Jewish commentary on that passage suggested that "in that night they were redeemed, and in that night they will be redeemed [again] in the future" (William L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 1975, p. 501, quoting the Melkita, XIV.20a).

Now, in Jesus' hands, **this meal would gain further importance** as he himself was about to become **the Passover lamb par excellence** -- who would deliver God's people by the sacrifice of his own blood. Certain elements in the Passover meal – a broken piece of unleavened bread, and a cup of wine, would graphically explain the centrality of Christ to our salvation: his life would become our bread and his life's blood would become our wine. In a deep and abiding way, Jesus' fulfillment of the Passover was in accord with the dream of Israel, and he wanted his disciples to see it and to experience it. Moreover, it would be **the final meal that he would eat with his disciples.**

Far from being crushed in the gears of history, Jesus was turning its wheels just as he wished. His death was no accident! In fact, **the Last Supper** and our Lord's tender, moving words on that occasion: "Take it; this is my body" and "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many" (14:22, 24), would make no sense at all if Jesus wasn't the master of his own death. So we see that Jesus maintained a sovereign, premeditated, voluntary and detailed mastery over his life.

A God who is in control when the foundations of his own earthly existence are crumbling **is a God who can be trusted to sustain us** when it appears our life is tumbling in.

Peter and John, having found things exactly as Jesus had told them, **“prepared the Passover meal”** (14:16b). This included a search for unleavened matzos, bitter herbs, eggs, some wine, and then the lamb (ritually blessed and killed, kosher style, in the Temple precincts). Low tables were brought and set up, likely in a hollow square in the upstairs room, with low-lying couches placed around them -- unlike the large single table with chairs behind as was later portrayed by **Leonardo da Vinci** in his famous fresco. The lamb was set to roasting on a spit, just like in thousands of other rooms in Jerusalem. The whole city was redolent with the inviting aroma of roasting lamb.

2. The Master’s control over his betrayal (Mark 14:17-21).

That evening, which by Jewish reckoning began sometime after 6 p.m., Jesus and his other disciples arrived and placed themselves on the couches around the tables. From what we can gather from the other gospels (especially John 13:23-26), it appears that the seating, or more properly lounging, from left to right, included in part, John, then Jesus, and then Judas. This arrangement, with each reclining on his left elbow, as was customary, put Jesus’ head near Judas’ chest, and John’s near Jesus’ chest.

Jesus, of course, as the presiding rabbi, **was in charge of the celebration**. He led them by first pronouncing **a blessing** on the Passover remembrance. After the **prescribed questions** were asked about why they were celebrating this meal – perhaps by some of the disciples who would know what these questions were by heart (much as we may know the words of the institution of the Holy Communion meal), Jesus then **took the wine and drank the first cup**. Next, **he recited the story of their exodus and redemption** from Egypt, and then led them all in **the singing of a “new song” of praise** to the Lord for their redemption. He then directed their **drinking of the second cup of wine**. After this **he blessed and broke the matzos bread**, and handed it to the disciples, who **ate it by dipping it into the bitter herbs and stewed fruit** (William L. Lane, p. 497-498, reconstructs the Passover meal’s sequence by relying on the Mishna Pesachim, X2-4, 6 and the Mishna Beracoth, VI.1).

It was at this stage that **Jesus, “troubled in spirit”** (Jn. 13:21), **unleashed a bombshell**. Here’s how Mark put it: “While they were reclining at the tables, eating, he said, ‘I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me -- one who is eating with me’” (14:18 NIV) – **an allusion to the infamous treachery of Ahithophel, who betrayed King David** (2 Sam. 15:31). Here our Lord was echoing the words of Ps. 41:9: “Even my bosom friend whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.” What he was saying was, “There is one among us who is actually eating bread with us at this most sacred meal, who acts as if he is a friend, but who is really a traitor!” **The disciples were aghast**. Even though Jesus had warned them some time before that “one of you is a devil” (Jn. 6:70), they’d suspected no one, not even Judas Iscariot.

We know from other places in Scripture that **Judas’ motive may have sprung from greed**. We are told by John that Judas Iscariot was the man with the calculator who instantly knew the price of Mary’s costly ointment and who may well have been pilfering from the apostles’ funds (Jn. 4:5-6).

If you think it’s unbelievable that someone involved in such a great fellowship as that happy band of Jesus’ disciples enjoyed could at the same time be secretly be living out such great evil, think again. **The stories of associates who secretly bilk their company or who covertly betray their friends are legion**.

Jesus knew who was going to betray him. He must have seen it in Judas’ eyes and body whenever certain issues were being discussed. Perhaps Jesus could’ve done something about it before it was too late, but he also knew that one day Judas would have to succeed. Our Lord was hardly a doll caught in the crush of one event after another.

John then tells us **the “disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant.”** (Jn.13:22, NIV). Still none of them suspected Judas. “They began to be distressed and to say to [Jesus] one after another, ‘Surely, not I?’” (14:19). **Judas, ever cool, mouthed the same words, fooling everyone but Jesus**. All Jesus would’ve had to do was to point at Judas and say, “It’s you!” and Peter would’ve had him in a headlock before the words died away. But Mark has Jesus saying, cryptically, **“It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me”** (14:20). “Thanks a lot, Lord,” they must’ve thought. “That helps a whole bunch!”

Yet Jesus was still in control. In fact, he was so much in control that despite the ever-increasing nearness of the doom that awaited him, **he was reaching out to Judas in gracious love.** When he'd washed the disciples' feet before the meal began (Jn. 13), he'd also washed Judas' feet. Moreover, while washing their feet he said, "And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was going to betray him..." (13:10b, 11a). **"Judas, old friend,"** he was saying, **"you're not clean; do something about it before it's too late!"** It was a loving appeal to Judas' conscience.

Even the seating arrangement demonstrated Jesus' consideration for Judas. Most painters paint Judas somewhere on the periphery of the picture, skulking in a corner; **Jesus placed him right at his left side** where he could be close to him and even touch him. **Jesus' head was just inches from Judas' heart.** Thus they could talk without everyone being able to overhear the conversation, a perfect opportunity for Judas to offer a confession and whisper a prayer for forgiveness. And when John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," who was sitting on the right side of Jesus, was asked by Peter to find out who it was that Jesus meant to refer to when he said that one of them would betray him, Jesus replied, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish. So when he had dipped the piece of bread he gave it to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot" (Jn. 13:25-26). Although Judas was now identified, **by dipping the bread in the bowl and giving it to him Jesus was showing a last gesture of friendship** (cf. Ruth 2:14). **It's what friends did at a meal.** In effect, he was saying, "Even without your confession, my old friend, I'm offering you friendship and forgiveness. All you have to do is receive it; will you?"

But **Judas took the bread without repentance** – it seemed that no tender words could break down his determination to go through with what he had decided to do. Instead he remained aloof and arrogant. **John tells us that he thought it was at that moment that "Satan entered into him"** (Jn. 13:27a). Then Jesus quietly told him, "Do quickly what you are going to do" (Jn. 13:27b). Still thickheaded, no one else understood what Jesus meant. John tries to explain, "Some thought that because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival'; or, that he should give something to the poor" (Jn. 13:29). In any case, it was midnight for Judas' soul.

I think Jesus' offer was genuine. If Judas had repented, even at the last minute, he would've remained among the Twelve, though Jesus would've gone to his death by another process.

There was a Victorian poet, **William Ernest Henley** (1849-1903), who rather boldly wrote a poem entitled, "Invictus," which was later gratefully cited by Nelson Mandela as being of great help during his 27 years imprisonment on Robben Island, South Africa:

Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
 I thank whatever gods may be,
 For my unconquerable soul.
 In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
 Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.
 Beyond this place of wrath and tears
 Looms but the Horror of the shade,
 And yet the menace of the years
 Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
 It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll.
 I am the master of my fate:
 I am the captain of my soul.

Certainly, there have been a number of great men and women who have stood up to the "slings and arrows of misfortune" that life threw at them and still declared themselves to be victor, but I believe that **Jesus was uniquely "the captain of [his] soul."** With the loss of Judas, sealed by his own sinful heart and action, with Judas exiled forever from the apostolic fellowship, **Jesus continued to proclaim his sovereign self-mastery:** "For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born" (14:21; cf. 49b). **Jesus was uttering his own epitaph.** He might be "going" but he wouldn't be gone.

On the other hand, Judas “went out” to do what he felt he had to do (Jn. 13:30); yet, because it was wrong, it would be as if he’d never been born or existed. Except for the brief story later told of his sordid demise (Matt. 27:3-10; Acts 1:16-20), he was swallowed up in the blackness of the night.

As we know, **Jesus was eventually crucified, as the prophets had predicted** (Matt. 26:56a), **but he also became “the first-fruits of those who have died”** (1 Cor. 15:20). We proclaim the mystery of faith: “Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.” Christ is worshipped, and exalted and remembered forever. Who cares to remember Judas Iscariot, except in a slight, disparaging way? **The Master’s mastery when surrounded by seemingly triumphant sin and betrayal is glorious.** The Gospel of John records, “When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him’” (Jn. 13:31). Alleluia!

Jesus Christ is a Master who brings his mastery to our own dark times when we see only doom around us.

The story has been told of a Christian believer, Frederick Nolan, who was fleeing his enemies during a North African persecution. Hounded by his pursuers over hill and valley with no place to hide, he fell exhausted into a wayside cave half expecting to be found. Awaiting his capture and almost certain] death, he saw a spider weaving a web. Within minutes, the little bug had woven a beautiful web across the mouth of the cave. The pursuers arrived and wondered if Nolan was hiding there, but they thought it would have been impossible for him to enter the cave without dismantling the web. And so they went on. Having escaped, Nolan emerged from his hiding place and proclaimed, **“Where God is, a spider’s web is like a wall. Where God is not, a wall is like a spider’s web.”**

Mark Wheeler, “Secure in the Storm,” *Kindred Spirit*, Summer, 1986, p. 10.

Where is God in relation to your life? Is the wheel of your personal world in his hands? Fate ought not to determine the course of your life. **If you follow God, and count upon Christ you will never be crushed in the gears of life,** though all hell should be ranged against you.

Amen

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