

Good Friday 06

For the past week or so the media has made much of the discovery of the so-called Gospel of Judas. It is, no doubt, a remarkable historical find -- an apparently authentic fourth-century copy of a second-century document. But it tells us nothing more about Christian doctrine about 180 A.D., St. Irenaeus referred to the document in his arguments with the heretics of his day. So likely there was a group in the mid-second-century that was peddling false gospels

On Passion Sunday, we read from the Gospel of Mark, also about Judas, where Jesus says, "For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Mark 14:21).

The Passion of John opens with these words: "Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place where, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

Later on Jesus to Pilate: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

So much for he claims that the Gospel of Judas is supposed to advance, i.e. that Judas was not a traitor but a clandestine saint.

What remains interesting is why there should be such interest in Gospel of Judas. .

The first reason is that Christianity is a historical religion. It depends on actual events in history. Our faith is not about abstract principles or mythical stories. It is about the gritty stuff of history. From the promise made to Abraham to the empty tomb, the Christian faith depends on what happened to the God who became man and walked among us. That is why the historical record matters; it is why Christians are interested in archaeology and ancient documents.

The second reason for Christian interest is that Christianity is a scriptural faith -- the sacred texts matter. Christians are not, strictly speaking, "people of the book," for our faith is in a person, Jesus Christ, who left no writings whatsoever. Yet the sacred Scriptures are indispensable and venerated precisely as the word of God.

The Christian faith is not an antiquities obsession, however, pursuing this or that fragment to shed light on the faith. Christians read their scriptures in an ecclesial context; i.e., it is the Church that gives rise to the Scriptures, determines their canonical status, and meditates upon them. It could not be otherwise: The Church comes before the Scriptures, for the Church is necessary to recognize the existence of the Scriptures in the first place. It is the faith of the Church that distinguishes between the canonical gospels and the counterfeit gospels.

A third reason -- and I suspect the most powerful -- to explain Christian interest in the Gospel of Judas is that it addresses a great question: What happened to Judas? The Catholic Church, for her part, does not definitively declare anyone to be in Hell, as she does with the saints in Heaven. Yet the clear weight of the tradition is that Judas is in fact condemned. Such is the horror of condemnation that the believer instinctively recoils from that conclusion.

That conclusion is not obligatory for Christian believers, but the apparent condemnation of Judas underscores another important Christian reality, namely the personal nature of salvation. Judas is not some cog in a providential machine, required to do X so that Jesus could do Y. No one is arbitrarily sacrificed in the plan of salvation, and Judas remains free until the end. The Bible is full of repentant sinners, from King David to Saint Peter. The sin of Judas lies not in his betrayal, which could be repented of, but in his refusal to repent unto the Lord. He insisted on remaining alone with his sin, and his sin destroyed him.

The authentic or canonical gospels offer sinners great hope:

The great message is repeated over and over again - "Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."

Jesus prays for his persecutors and executioners: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

To the good thief he says: "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus say to Mary about John who represents all of us: "Woman, behold your son,"

Then he completes his thought saying to all of us: "Behold your Mother."

Jesus gifts us with his mother. His concern for us reaches beyond his death. The mother of God is now also my mother. The mother who gave birth to him will re-create his life in us.