

The Coal Fire

Fr. Benedict Kiely
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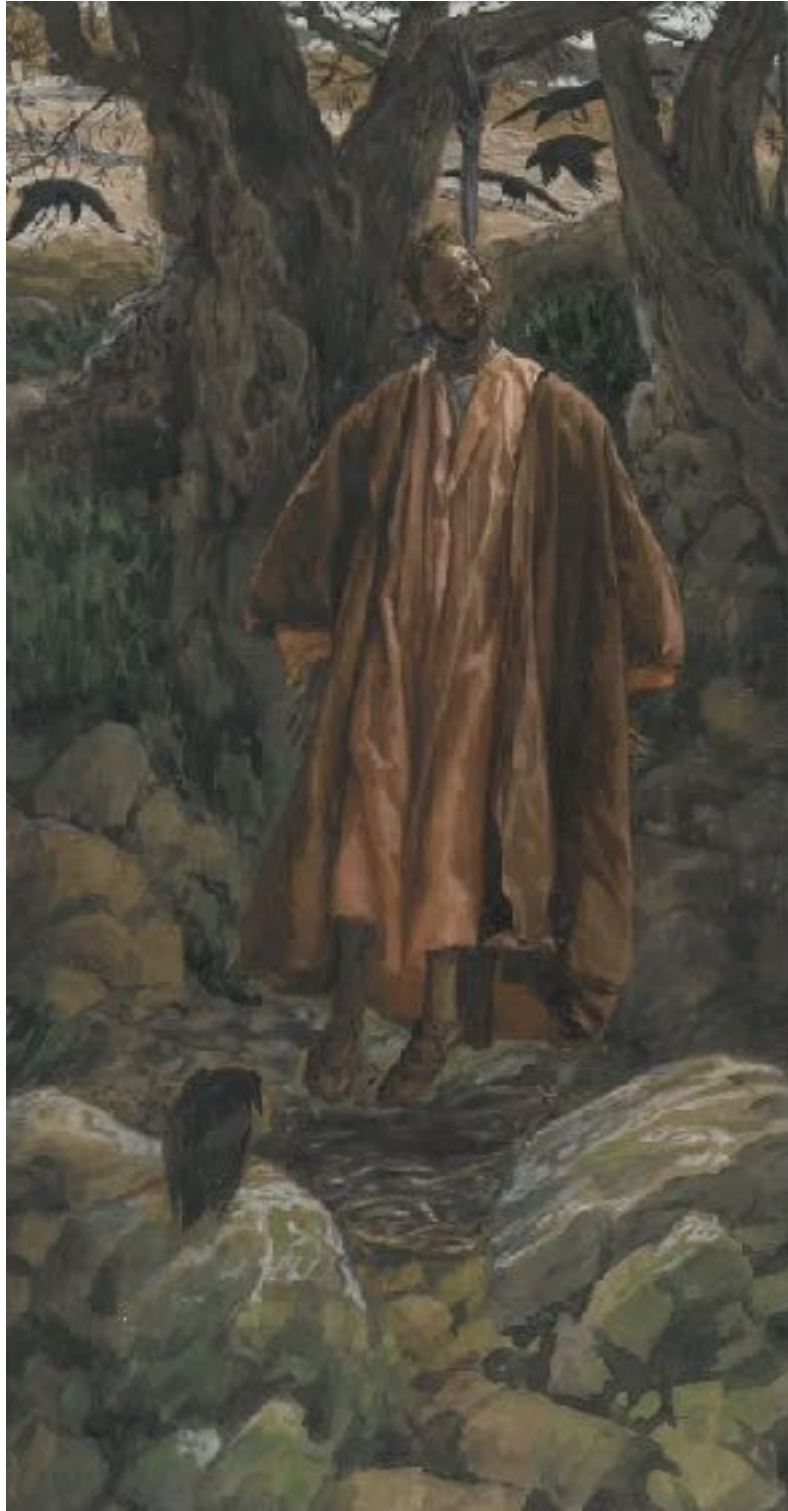
The journey we began nearly six weeks ago is almost over, or, to paraphrase Churchill, it is just the beginning of the end. We are about to enter the Sacred Triduum, the unbroken liturgical celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the life, saving death, and Resurrection of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord of history and of Creation, the King of the Universe, God made man.

As we pass through these days, we need to be ready to reaffirm our baptismal promises on Easter Day, something of truly profound significance. When we hear the solemn proclamation of the Passion read, **three characters are intimately involved in the Passion who, each in their own way, reflect aspects of our own Christian lives, and from whom we might draw certain lessons for the future.**

It is quite traditional, of course, to **try to identify with characters** in the Biblical accounts, and we could pick almost anyone in the Passion narrative, as there are so many and so varied figures involved. Even what we might call the “bit parts,” or the extras, have a place in the story.

For our meditation for the Triduum, I propose **Judas, St. Peter, and St. John. Judas, we know, is the figure of betrayal, St. Peter, the figure of denial, and St. John, the figure of fidelity.**

***Judas Hangs Himself**^[1] by J.J. Tissot, c. 1890 [Brooklyn Museum]*



If we are honest with ourselves, times of humility, betrayal, denial, and fidelity come and go in our own

lives as Christians. Perhaps we draw back at the suggestion of identification with Judas, but what is serious sin if not a betrayal of the Lord?

What is taking public positions against the solemn teaching of the Church, our “disagreement” with difficult dogmas, if not betrayal? We know, sadly, that when the Church is actively persecuted, it is often members of the Church Herself who betray their brethren, usually out of fear, but also many times because of avarice or desire for advancement.

Judas is the figure of betrayal, but also the figure of conformity, the man of the culture, who wants to make Christ after his own image. He is the churchman who is happy to be welcomed and supported by the money and influence of the State; let us not imagine that a “patriotic Church” exists only in China – there are many who represent a Church of the *Zeitgeist*, vapidly echoing the latest cultural fashion, seeking to “accompany” sin and deviation, and failing to preach, with any sense of what’s at stake, repentance and renewal.

Judas sadly, seems to embody another feature of the Church in these times, in a particular way – he lacks supernatural faith. Christ, or the Christ of his desires and imagination, has, in a sense, betrayed him, because Christ is not a political actor.

The Lord speaks of another world and of eternity. Much leadership in the Church seems focussed on the secular, to the complete negation of the transcendent. **For episcopal appointments, things like commitment to the Green Agenda should very far down on the list – and perhaps a little more of the saving message of the Gospel might be in order.**

St. Peter is the figure that, perhaps, we identify with more easily. A simple man, and, often portrayed in the Gospels

as foolish, impulsive – indeed, sometimes quite thoughtless. **If repentance is part of our lives, which it obviously should be, it is quite right that we can see ourselves in him.**

Let us not, however, rush too quickly from his denial of the Lord to his repentance. There is a coal fire we have all sat around, warming our limbs and denying our companionship with Christ: That silence when the Faith is attacked, when the Church is abused, or even, once again, when we fail to live the fullness of the Faith through sin and weakness. **We warm ourselves beside the coal fire of complacency, as society crumbles, the Church is weak, but we keep warming our hands in silence.**

Yet the tears of Judas and the tears of Peter are quite different. **Tears of despair are also tears of betrayal, because they are tears without the hope of forgiveness. St. Peter's tears were tears of repentance and contrition; they were tears shed on Good Friday itself, but with the seed of the Resurrection.**



What Our Lord Saw from the Cross ^[3] by J.J. Tissot, c. 1890 [Brooklyn Museum]

St. Peter is truly our patron of confession and humility. The very fact that the Gospels do not gloss over his failure and weakness are an immense and moving witness to his stature, who at another coal fire, would be commissioned by the Lord to feed and strengthen the sheep, precisely because he had known weakness and betrayal, but had returned in humility.

St. John, the beloved disciple, the one apostle who neither betrayed or denied, who stayed at the foot of the Cross with Mary, the one Jesus loved, is surely our model and **the one we all imagine ourselves to be** (or the one we say we would have been if we had been there). **He is the one we need to be, or try to become, as we renew those baptismal promises.**

St. John with his head close to the heart of Jesus, walking with Mary, the preacher of the Eucharist, St. John is the faithful churchman, who speaks only of what he has “seen and heard” – the Gospel of redemption.

The times ahead will see more betrayal and more denial, therefore we must pray for the grace to be faithful. As Fr. Benedict Baur has written, the palm branches held on Palm Sunday are also the symbol of martyrdom. We promise to be witnesses on Easter Sunday, if necessary, to the point of blood. Let Judas be a warning to us; and may both St. Peter and St. John inspire and help us on the road ahead.

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