

## Prayer

Breathe, O Holy Spirit of God, breath on me. Stir my senses into life, revive my faltering hopes and dreams and reawaken my love for You and for others. Then catch me up within the spiritual wind that blows throughout the world to do the Father's will, and reveal to me what You would have me do. My life is fulfilled in You, awesome Holy Spirit of God! AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Ways to pray

Write a list of the things on your mind and add to it during the day. Review it prayerfully in the evening.

### Prayers for today

- **Pray for people of other faiths** Pray for those who hold Buddhist beliefs. Pray that God will fill them with a sense of purpose for this life
- Pray for those affected by abuse within the Catholic church
- Praise God for laughter and joy, and all happiness in life

## Meditation

Almighty God, restore our sight.

- To see the face of God in the smile of a child;
- To see beyond what is visible to the eternal truth;
- To see the love and purpose of Your healing touch;
- To see evil and its consequences and resist its lies;
- To see the things of God within the natural world;
- To see beauty in the world despite its ugliness;
- To see the difference made to life by practical faith;
- To see justice and truth and pursue them with vigour;

We praise You, Lord God, for sight restored.

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## Bible passage – Matthew 26:14-25

<sup>14</sup> Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests <sup>15</sup> and said, 'What will you give me if I hand him over to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. <sup>16</sup> From then on Judas began to look for an opportunity to hand him over.

<sup>17</sup> On the first day of the feast of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?' <sup>18</sup> He said, 'Go into the city to a man I know, and say to him, "The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples."' <sup>19</sup> So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and prepared the Passover.

<sup>20</sup> When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; <sup>21</sup> and while they were eating, he said, 'Amen, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' <sup>22</sup> They were shocked and began to say to him in turn, 'Surely not I, Lord?' <sup>23</sup> Jesus replied, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. <sup>24</sup> The Son of Man will go just 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 him if he had not been born.' <sup>25</sup> Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

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# Bible Study

## Review

From this point onwards in the Gospel of Matthew, we are plunged into the drama of Jesus' last full day on earth. The whole of the narrative in Matthew Gospel, from this point until the very end, flows through as if written together as one piece. After reading the rest of the Gospel, with its short stories and episodes from Jesus' life organised together to say something consistent about the life of Jesus, this final story is dramatic. Perhaps the only way for us to come to terms with it is to read it all as one, but in this study series we do not have this luxury. We must read it and take it in verses by verse, section by section, and bearing in mind the impact on the whole Gospel of this immense divine and human drama.

Today's passage is largely about the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, but it contains the famous incident in which Jesus told his disciples to go and make preparations for the Passover meal they would all share together. The Passover was a weeklong religious festival for which thousands of Jews came to Jerusalem annually, but it seems that for Jesus and His disciples, it came down to one meal shared together. It would have been difficult to find rooms to share this meal simply because of the congestion of the capital, but Jesus had this under control (26:17-19). The incident is rather like that of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, where He seems to surprise his disciples by having contacts in Jerusalem and being in command of all that was happening, despite the uncertainty around Him.

The other Gospel writers, Mark and Luke, both give more detail about this incident (Mark 14:12-16, Luke 22:7f.), but Matthew's concise story quickly conveys Jesus' mastery of the occasion. The Passover was the Jewish celebration of God's deliverance of His people, and Jesus knew that it was the time His Father had chosen for Him to die. He would die to save both His own people, and the people of the whole world, even though neither people knew it.

It is not surprising therefore that alongside the preparations for the Passover Matthew reports the sordid details of the preparations made for Jesus' death. For reasons we will never fully understand or know (though we will explore this later on), Judas was not able to let things continue and felt he had to betray Jesus to the authorities. He went to them (26:14) and negotiated his price. We will find out later that Judas was required to identify Jesus to an arresting mob at night time, and he was rewarded in advance with a sum of money, '*thirty pieces of silver*' (26:15). So while Jesus was instructing the disciples to prepare a meal to be shared, Judas was plotting to bring Him down; Jesus' actions were selfless, and Judas' actions were motivated by money. Throughout history, Satan has used money to confuse people's motives and create the mayhem of death and destruction, even if on this occasion, he was set to lose the battle!

Lastly, we read the report of an awful incident during the Passover meal (26:20-25). Jesus challenged his disciples about their loyalty, and after all the others had responded with shock to Jesus' words, Judas spoke last. His reply to Jesus was hardly different from that of the other disciples, but the meaning was very different and Jesus knew this (26:25). He knew Judas was His betrayer. We hear no more of Judas until he appears later in the chapter, in the very act of betrayal (26:47).

Tomorrow, we will read the rest of the story of Jesus' 'Last Supper', with its description of the 'breaking of bread' and the sharing of the wine, the 'blood of the Covenant'. Our story today has prepared for this, but the dramatic tension of the story is extraordinary. The preparation of the meal is interwoven with the preparation of Judas' treachery, and the manner in which the story switches between the two adds to the tension. This, however, is far more than intriguing literature. This is the true story of the salvation of the world.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The plans for the betrayal of Jesus
- Preparations for the Last Supper
- The conversation between Jesus and Judas

## Going Deeper

### ***Plans for the betrayal of Jesus***

We know from the story so far in Matthew that the authorities, namely the chief priests and the elders of the people (26:3), were seeking a way to arrest Jesus by deceit. This was necessary to avoid any reaction by the large crowds in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, something that could leave the authorities in

considerable difficulty with their Roman overlords. We cannot be sure about how Judas and the authorities were tracking Jesus' movements, or what they were looking for as the right time to arrest Him, but it is not hard to imagine that if Judas was harbouring misunderstanding, dissatisfaction or disillusionment, he could easily have found the authorities.

Judas' decision to betray his master is probably the biggest mystery of the Gospels, despite the details we know from Matthew and from the other Gospel. He went to the chief priests (26:14) and offered them the 'inside' knowledge of Jesus' movements they needed; he alone could say where he would be and when (26:15). He was offered thirty pieces of silver with the minimum of haggling, and all Judas had to do was to give the authorities a signal at the right moment, when Jesus could be arrested away from the crowds (26:16).

Thousands of people have proffered their theses as to why Judas should do this. As the only Judean in the group, was he jealous of the Galilean leadership of Peter? Did he expect the Messiah to triumph visibly at the point of His death? Did he believe he was doing God's will by hastening Jesus' path to the Cross? Was he acting out of despair because Jesus the Messiah had not proved to be man he expected? Or did he come to the same conclusion as the young Saul of Tarsus, and believe that Jesus was a false prophet (Gal 1:13)?

All or any of these explanations are possible, because scripture gives us virtually no clues with which to come to any conclusion. It does seem to me, however, that financial gain was at least a factor. The price offered by the chief priests was thirty pieces of silver; about four months pay at current minimum wage levels. This was not enough to make a major difference to Judas' life but a tidy sum nevertheless to have in hand. The sum reported to us may well have been influenced by either Exodus 21:32, giving the price to be paid for the release of a slave, or more probably Zechariah 11:12,13 describing the derisory wages of a rejected shepherd (a Messianic figure) '*they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver*'. Jesus had frequently taught about the perils and corruption of money (6:19-21, 24; 19:22, 23-26), and it clearly had a hand in His betrayal!

### **Preparations for the Last Supper**

The scene changes rapidly (26:17-19), returning to the feast of Unleavened Bread. This was a week long celebration concluding with the Passover meal. While the Jerusalem Temple was standing, all lambs for the Passover meal were killed there. There is one aspect of the event that may well escape a reader today, and this is the timing of everything. For Jewish people, a day started and ended at sundown, not in the middle of the night. So, for example, the lambs for the Passover sacrifice were killed on the afternoon of the day before Passover, but the Passover meal itself was eaten in the evening of what for us would be the same day, but for the Jews, because this was after sundown, this would be the next day!

The disciples then made preparations for the Passover meal (26:19 – see also Exodus 12:28). It is easy to forget that the Passover meal was normally eaten in a family groups, but this Passover meal was eaten by Jesus' with His 'new family' (12:46ff, 19:29), which was the elementary community of the gathered people of God, soon to become the 'Church'. Jesus knew that His 'time was near' (v18) and the Greek words of this phrase are indicative of the end of the age and the beginning of a new era.

There are many disputes about when Jesus actually celebrated the 'Last Supper', and some of the arguments about this can only be studied when we look closely at John's Gospel. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that John says Jesus died at the same time the Passover lambs were sacrificed in the Temple, which was the day before the Passover meal (meaning earlier in the day, as above). If this was the case, then Jesus had His last meal the day before Passover; and we know He certainly wanted to celebrate Passover before He died (see Luke 22:15,16). Would it have worried Jesus to celebrate the Passover meal one day before? The meal that is described in Matthew's Gospel certainly lacks any reference to the essential food for a Jewish Passover, which is the 'lamb'; the concentration is on bread and wine, and of course, Jesus was Himself about to become the sacrificial lamb for the whole world! The meaning of all this and the timing of it all remains something of an enigma, but it is undoubtedly true is that our passage describes a meal with some but not all of the elements of a Passover (26:20f.).

### **The Passover Meal and the role of Judas**

Most Passover meals began with the following words from scripture, which celebrate Israel's deliverance; '*I will bring you out from under the yoke of slavery*' (Ex 6:6). When the time came for the meal, Jesus began differently, not with these words, but with a prophecy of his betrayal by one of His closest family. He said, '*one of you will betray me*' (26:21). This must have been something of a shock to those present. The disciples had heard Jesus talk of His coming death and betrayal, but it was the first time they heard that it would be one of them!

Nevertheless, the meal must have continued, and Matthew speaks of something that is a feature of the Passover, the dipping of herbs into salt water (26:23). Dipping is mentioned, but not the details of what is

dipped; of course, this would be quite normal for Matthew, for whom the very mention of the word would imply everything else. Jews dipped the herbs to remember the bitter experience of slavery (see verse 23). In Mark's Gospel (Mark 14:20) Jesus is described as dipping bread into the bowl, but Matthew misses this out, pointing to the pathos of the betrayal of Jesus by one who had shared the hard life of discipleship with Him. The Passover meal continues within the passage we shall look at tomorrow (26:26-35), but in our passage today, the story now pauses, giving close attention to the last interaction between Jesus and Judas before the famous betrayal kiss (26:49)

The height of the drama with Judas occurs at the end of our text. When Jesus prophesied His betrayal (26:21), the disciples responded with distress and shock, asking in turn 'surely not I, Lord?' (26:22). Jesus prophesied again with fierce words which condemned of any who undermine the work of the Son of God (26:24). Now Judas had already begun the process of betrayal, so it is interesting that in his reply, Matthew records that he could no longer call Jesus 'Lord'. He said '*surely not I, Rabbi*'. Jesus knew what was going on, but refrained from exposing Judas openly, something that would probably have caused the lynching of Judas before he could reach a door. We, too, who read the story, know that Jesus' quiet response '*you have said so ...*' was an acknowledgement of what Judas was about to do.

In this way, Psalm 41:9 was tragically fulfilled in the life and death of the Saviour of the World; '*Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate with me, has lifted the heel against me.*'

## Application

What can we do with this story? It is surely impossible to interpret it fully because Scripture does not say enough about why Judas took the action he did. Yet even this lack of knowledge may of itself be of importance. If Matthew's Gospel told us that Judas betrayed Jesus because of envy, for example, how tempting would it then be for us to focus on envy as the sin that caused the death of the Saviour? If Judas betrayed Jesus because he could not accept Jesus' claims, would that mean that we would persecute people because of doubt?

It may well be the Lord's will that we do not know, and we therefore have to accept the truth, that 'any sin' and 'all sin' is responsible for Jesus' betrayal. Put another way, even our own sins have taken our Lord to the Cross. All of this is necessary if we are to make the case that Jesus 'died for our sins'. Yet even though this sin of Judas was his own free choice, God could see and had foreseen the whole picture, and Jesus was ready for what would happen. When, in the Old Testament book of Genesis, Joseph spoke to his brothers at the end of the long story of his rise to fame in Egypt, he said '*you meant evil against me; God meant it for good*' (Gen 50:20). This is the divine paradox with which we must live when reading the story of Judas.

It is possible for us to find a number of ways to make good out of evil, but ultimately, only God can do this. The unique evidence that good triumphs over evil is found in the life of Jesus, and in His death and resurrection. Now, although it is tempting to read the story of this and focus on the 'good' bit at the end, we should never forget that the Gospels provide us with an intriguing account of the evils that led to Jesus' death, and amongst this is that of Judas. Like all evil, we cannot pin it down, but it is real. We would be advised to remember that this is the nature of much evil.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Does this passage of Scripture help you understand the 'Last Supper', and why we celebrate this as Christians today? What does it tell us about this meal?
2. Have you experienced a Jewish 'Passover' meal? If not, look this up on the internet, and compare it with what happens in your church at communion.
3. This passage is a story about human betrayal and human love. What does the passage say about each of these?

### **Topics covered by this text**

- *The establishment of the Last Supper*
- *The sin of betrayal, and the betrayal of Jesus*
- *Jesus' command of all human life*

## **Personal comments by author**

*The celebration of the Lord's Supper is a profoundly important part of life for all Christians. Jesus asked His followers to share this meal in remembrance of Him. However, I have always felt that the Christian church has over-institutionalised what is supposed to be a family occasion, as was the first 'Passover' as celebrated by the Jewish people. Surely there is some way in which the father or mother in a family might celebrate the Lord's Supper in the home, and therefore make a mark of faith where it counts most? I have found few takers for the idea in all my years of ministry.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Spend some time thinking about what Judas did, and reading the stories from scripture that explain what he did. Do his words or actions remind you of any problem or sin in your own life?*
- *Google the word 'Judas' and see what you find; indeed, pray about what you find. You will discover that the world is quite interested in Judas, and how and why He betrayed Jesus. The world often acts rather like Judas, so pray for the world and its strange perceptions of right and wrong.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus, forgive us if we read these stories from the Gospels and misunderstand the truth about what You experienced. You were there, and You said these words. You understand the truth of all that happened. Speak into our own hearts with a word of truth and comfort, so that we may know You are speaking to us through these Scriptures, and what we witness in our hearts is the truth. We ask this in Your name, Lord Jesus, AMEN

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