

“The Plot Thickens” – Passion Sunday, Apr 9, 2006

I assume most of you have seen the sensationalist headlines in the newspapers this week, or heard the breathless comments on TV about the discovery of a set of ancient documents in the Egyptian desert? “This Changes Everything!” screamed some headlines. “New Truths Emerge!” was the theme of front page stories in National papers. Good grief! Haven’t these people read anything about Christianity?!

For those of you who haven’t stumbled over these earth-shattering revelations, the flap is all about the discovery of some ancient handwritten documents. Scientific analysis, namely carbon dating, which seems to be acceptable to the more fundamental elements of the church only when the results fit existing ideology, has dated the documents to the Fourth Century A.D., somewhere between 300 and 400. Iraenaues, one of the early Church ‘important persons’ mentions the existence of such a document, but this is the first time a document that could be the one he mentioned has actually surfaced.

The issue that has the news media drooling is that this document portrays Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus to the Roman/Jewish authorities, as a hero. The document opens with “The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover,” and goes on to claim that Judas did what he did at the request of Jesus who told him that he “would exceed all the others.”

It’s all fascinating reading, although it gets awfully confusing the further along in the text you go. I was intrigued to note that the official translation has the rubrics “Scene 1”, “Scene 2” and so forth. There is no explanation as to whether these are actually in the text itself – if so, it surely raises the possibility the document was written as a stage play.

In any event, the issue of Judas’ role in events has been a subject of controversy in the Church since it all happened. Countless theological debates have ranged and raged over whether Judas was acting on his own will, or had lost his mind, or was driven by Satan, or was even urged by Jesus and/or God, so this new discovery is more ‘same old, same old.’

The official version, or versions as the case may be, received that stamp of officialdom in 382 B.C. when it was decided and announced which of the books that were circulating at the time would be included in the Bible, and perhaps more importantly which ones were not. As one commentator in the New York Times said, “I suspect the gospel of Judas was not one of the close calls in this process.”

And it’s abundantly clear from our reading what the author of the Gospel of Mark thought about Judas and his actions, namely “better not to have been born.” Mind you, if he hadn’t, then there would possibly have been no betrayal, and thus no cross, and we wouldn’t be here this morning!

But we are here, and we hear the familiar story, and we give thanks to God for all that happened, because out of it all comes meaning, and life.

We’re only looking at the beginning of the story today, in part because the whole story is too long for one service, and it seems appropriate as we begin this Holy Week that takes us to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to start at the beginning of the story, and to let ourselves get drawn into those fateful events.

The story unfolds in a sequence of pictures, just like a slide show, or even a PowerPoint presentation. The first slide opens with an ominous warning of trouble to come. The time is specific, two days before the Passover, the festival of Unleavened Bread that celebrated the pending departure of the Israelites from captivity and slavery in Egypt. The smell of blood is in the air with even the mention of Passover, recalling the smearing of lamb’s blood on the lintels of doorways to keep the Israelite children safe. The smell of blood is in the air also with the revealing of a secretive, unpopular scheme to arrest and kill Jesus. The knives are out in more ways than one!

Meanwhile, back in Bethany, there is a tender and touching scene, in which Jesus is anointed with very expensive ointment by a woman, a scene that also echoes with the hint of death as Jesus proclaims her action is in preparation for his burial.

The scene shifts once more, and the drumbeat of betrayal and impending death becomes louder and more insistent. In what must have taken place in shadows and behind closed doors, Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, makes the secretive arrangements to betray Jesus, and receives a promise of a monetary reward for doing so.

Our attention turns back to the sunshine, to Jesus and the disciples, and to thoughts of a sacrificial lamb. As the disciples ask Jesus about making preparations for the meal, he gives them detailed instructions about meeting and following a man carrying a jar of water. Affirming that every detail told them by Jesus was to come true, the disciples followed his instructions, and “found everything as he had told them.”

Now to the evening darkness, with the soft glow of oil lamps in the room, and Jesus and the disciples gathered around the table, eating. Soft light, smooth conversation, until the plot thickens with Jesus dropping a bombshell into the middle of the gathering. “One of you will betray me,” he tells them, and they understandably become agitated and greatly distressed. “Surely, not I?” each proclaims, unaware that before the tragic events had completely unfurled each and every one of them would have betrayed him, not merely the one who would trigger those fateful events for a purse of silver.

And then the most incredible scene – after proclaiming that one of them would betray him, and aware that all would betray him, Jesus offers to them the bread and the wine, his body and his blood, the symbols of life and the new covenant with God. Knowing their imperfections, knowing our imperfections, even and because of our incomplete, inadequate and imperfect faith, Jesus offered not only these symbols of himself, but all of himself. All the documents that could ever be found that try to explain away Judas’ motives count for nothing against the record of this magnificent act of holy obedience and sacrifice.

It is no wonder that artists over the ages have tried to capture this moment, trying to help us to stop and stare at the picture of that moment when Jesus offered the bread and the wine to all who would accept and share in his grace. The images of that moment cannot be adequately captured on canvas, on film, on DVD, but they can be recreated in our minds as we participate in the sacrament. Let yourself be transported in the moment of sharing back to that guest room, with the air hanging thick with the tension of Jesus’ announcement of betrayal. Let yourself be enveloped by the night sounds, the smells of burning lamps and fresh bread and hearty wine and figs and dust. Let yourself be enveloped also by the overwhelming love of God incarnated in your host at the table, offering not just bread and wine but life and life everlasting, not for anything you have done but simply because you are there, accepting. As you taste the bread, taste the possibilities offered by God for sharing, for fulfilling, for loving. As you drink the wine, feel the life pour into you, life pulsing with the tang of joy and the saltiness of tears. This is the moment of connection with God – savour it with all your being.

Finally, just as in that closing scene, we too will sing the hymn and head out to climb the mountain. The supper cannot last forever, although the celebrating and reenactment of it will. That special moment comes, and goes, and we return to our time and place, refreshed, reenergized, recommitted to not only follow Christ but to proclaim our allegiance by displaying his love. Our allegiance and faith is not perfect. We will, like the disciples, trip and stumble, but like them we will also live out our lives in the security and peace of being covered by the new covenant in Christ. All thanks be to God for His gift of life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.