

Failing Jesus (Matthew 26:14-27:66)

Judas is hardly the only one who lets Jesus down.

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The contrast between the joy of Palm Sunday and the sorrow of the Passion is breathtaking. Jesus' triumphal entry turns quickly into a full-fledged battle. (It's a pity the lectionary doesn't include any of Jesus' head-to-head scuffle with the scribes and Pharisees, the money-changers and the chief priests!) We know who wins the skirmishes: by the time Passover arrives, Judas has agreed to betray Jesus.

But Judas is hardly the only one who fails Jesus:

- After celebrating the Passover meal, Jesus takes James and John and Peter with him to retreat to Gethsemane to pray. As Jesus pours his heart out in grief, his closest friends can't even keep their eyes open.
- As the crowds arrive with swords and clubs--a far cry from the cloaks and palm branches--one disciple dismisses Jesus' teaching of peace. Instead he meets violence with violence, cutting off the ear of the slave of the high priest.
- While Jesus is taken to the house of the high priest, Peter follows into the courtyard. But instead of honoring his teacher, Peter denies three times even knowing Jesus.
- In the court of the high priest, all of the religious leaders--who purportedly desire to do God's will--try to get witnesses to lie about Jesus. Most refuse, but the two who come forward are enough to turn the tide; soon Jesus is convicted of blasphemy.

- Once Jesus is convicted by the religious leaders, he is taken to the governor, Pilate. Pilate gives in to manipulated populist demand, washing his hands of any responsibility.

In the end, only a Gentile centurion and a number of women stay faithful to Jesus. No one in his inner circle, no one with religious responsibility, no one with civil power does anything at all to stand for Jesus.

Which makes me wonder: how would we do? I have a feeling that our fidelity will be sorely tested in the days ahead. I fear that we will take up the Machiavellian tools of cunning and duplicity, that we will seek our self-preservation at the cost of others' fate, that we will be swept up in the heat of the moment and follow the will of the crowd. I pray that I'm wrong.