



Where do your loyalties lie?

3 - Matthew and Judas Iscariot



Matthew, icon

Prayer

Loving God, help us as we look a little deeper into the lives of those who Jesus chose to be his disciples, and may their stories help us on our own journeys of faith. Amen

Opening Question

How difficult is it to let go of things that mean a lot to you, and is it harder for some than others?

Who were they?

According to the Authorised Version, Matthew was a publican sitting at the tax collector's booth, but this is an incorrect translation of the Latin word 'publicanus' which simply means someone who collected taxes. It's difficult for us to imagine how much the general population hated tax-gatherers like Matthew, who were eager to serve their country's conquerors. There were many taxes, some payable from the age of twelve, and these individuals were known to extract whatever they could from people, taking bribes from the rich and lining their own pockets once the demands of the law had been met.

So, meet Matthew (or Levi as he is called in the gospels of Mark and Luke),

the son of Alphaeus, probably from Capernaum near to the Sea of Galilee.

We know nothing about the background of Judas Iscariot other than mention is made of his father, Simon Iscariot (John 6:71). It has been suggested that the name Iscariot in Hebrew means 'man of Kirioth' which could locate the family originally from the south of Judea. Like Matthew he handled money, and John's Gospel tells us that Judas carried the disciples' money bag. As such he would have accepted donations towards their cause (see Luke 8:1-3) and allocated funds for provisions on the journeys that Jesus and his disciples undertook (see John 13:29).

Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick?

Read: Luke 5:27-32

How would you like to bid at auction for the rights to collect taxes within your local area? You would have to agree with the authorities on a sum which needed to be handed over, but above and beyond that the rest would be yours to keep as commission. There are downsides, in that the Jews believe only God is rightly called king, and it is wrong to pay taxes to a foreign power, so you would be banned from

SAMPLE

the synagogue, even considered as unclean as the animals the Jews refuse to eat and classed together with robbers and murderers. But the financial rewards would be considerable!

No wonder that the Pharisees raised objections about Jesus fraternising with such a hated person, which prompted that memorable retort from Jesus about who was it that needed a doctor, the healthy or the sick?

It is more than likely that Matthew had already heard about Jesus. He would have met, and taken tax, from many traders passing through the area, and may have learned that this charismatic teacher called Jesus was gathering around him all manner of people, including those considered outsiders (such as himself). Perhaps Matthew had been thinking it was time to make changes in his life, in which case Jesus arriving at his tax stall was a wonderful answer to prayer and would explain his quick response. It would be a response that would leave him poorer in material things but richer in so many other ways.



Judas, 16th century fresco

Judas Iscariot has also responded to Jesus' message and Jesus has seen enough potential within this man, as with Matthew, for him to be selected to be part of a close group of disciples who, after a brief period of teaching and tough on-the-job training, will be entrusted with so much responsibility.

Questions

- 1) Are there any 'tax-gatherers' (or people of any profession) who you would find it difficult to sit next to at a dinner party, and why?
- 2) Put simply, there were two kinds of people in Jesus' day – there were the orthodox who kept the Law and all the petty regulations to the letter, and those that didn't. The second kind were known as 'the people of the land' and it was forbidden to do business with them, journey with them or to enter their homes as guests. Jesus' action cut right through this barrier. How difficult is it for churches to connect with those who might be thought of as 'outsiders'?
- 3) What do you think Jesus saw in these two cash-centred individuals?
- 4) We don't hear of any problems, but how easy do you think someone like Matthew would find it to become accepted within Jesus' inner circle of followers?

The journey of discipleship

Read John 12:1-8

At the start of his journey of discipleship, Judas was one of 'the twelve' sent out with power over unclean spirits, the gift of healing and with a message to proclaim (Matthew 10:5-14). As such he played a very active role in this mission work alongside the other disciples.

SAMPLE

Jesus did not make it easy for any of his followers, expecting much and challenging them with his teaching and training. Many expected the Messiah to be a military leader, and Jesus was anything but that. After one long session at Capernaum we are told that there was grumbling among many of those following, some saying; 'This is hard teaching. Who can accept it?' and it seems quite a few turned their back on him at that point (John 6:60-71).

Perhaps it is here that Judas also started to have second thoughts about the journey he had started. Jesus directly asked the disciples if they were going to turn away from him (John 6:67-70) to which Simon Peter answered. 'To who shall we go, because you have the words of eternal life?' But John gives us a hint that Jesus knew where Judas' thoughts were turning.

However, Judas did not turn away at that moment, and was still close to Jesus when, approaching Jerusalem for the last time they stopped at the house in Bethany where Lazarus lived. Here Mary famously poured expensive perfume over Jesus' feet, filling

the house with its fragrance. Judas didn't understand the significance of this action and criticised it as a waste of money, but John tell his readers that this was more to do with Judas' love of money than any charitable thoughts. This is possibly reflected in the story from Matthew's Gospel of Judas accepting a bribe of thirty pieces of silver to hand Jesus over to the soldiers of the High Priest Caiaphas (some commentators suggest that Matthew might have added this part of Judas' story in order that might fit prophesy).

It would appear Matthew the apostle was able to set aside his love of money whilst following Jesus. Like some of the other disciples he was in the background, listening to Jesus, watching the miracles happen around him, seeing the many who gathered wherever they went, looking for healing and hope, but also watching those who were plotting against Jesus. All we know is that he was still with the core group of disciples when Jesus rose from death and appeared in the upper room (Acts 1:10-14).

Questions

- 1) If the argument is all about the waste of expensive perfume, why do you think Mary greeted Jesus in this way?
- 2) Why might Jesus have entrusted Judas with the post of treasurer if he knew what was ultimately in this man's heart and mind?
- 3) The change in Matthew's life must have been dramatic, giving up such a lucrative income to follow Jesus. Is there always an element of 'giving up' in answering the call to 'Follow me'?

The later years

Matthew's chief claim to immortality and fame is that it is to his name that the Gospel of Matthew is attributed. The early Christian bishop Papias of Hierapolis (c. 100–140 CE) tells us that Matthew collected the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew tongue, which would have included such important teachings as

the Sermon on the Mount, found nowhere else. These must then have been translated into Greek and used as source material by an unknown author, incorporated into the gospel to which Matthew's name was attached. If this is true, then Jesus' choosing of someone who was used to putting words

together on paper was fortuitous. Matthew may have been in the background when all the action was taking place, but he was there taking notes!

Judas Iscariot has no glorious legacy to leave, simply a story of betrayal which seems to have been foreseen and allowed by Jesus (John 6:64, Matthew 26:25). The betrayal is widely believed to have happened, based if for no other reason than the early church would be unlikely to include



Woodcut from Anton Koberger's Bible (Nuremberg, 1483): The angelically inspired Saint Matthew musters the Old Testament figures, led by Abraham and David

something into their story that seemed to reflect badly on Jesus. There are several accounts of the death of Judas, and the two in the Bible either have Judas hanging himself in shame (Matthew 27:3-10) or buying a field and then falling to his death somehow (Acts 1:18-19).

Papias suggests that a bloated Judas got run over and crushed by a chariot so badly that his bowels gushed out!

Questions

- 1) Matthew's Gospel includes around 90% of the material from Mark (the earliest of the four), along with passages which are found nowhere else in the gospels. Mark's Gospel tells us much about the events of Jesus' life, and Matthew's expands this with the depth of Jesus' teachings. How important to the Church therefore is the disciple Matthew?
- 2) We owe a lot to those who have written down episodes in the evolving story of the Church. In a digital age, where so much news is short-lived and on social media, how are future generations going to learn about today's Church?
- 3) Should Jesus have done all that he could to prevent the tragedy that was fermenting in Judas's mind, or is this about free will being allowed?
- 4) You probably know people who have left churches, some to move to another, others who have turned their backs on Christianity altogether. How might potential loss be best handled, if it is more about doctrine than personalities?

Thought to ponder

Can these two characters speak into your own journey of faith?

And for prayer

Pray for those who are struggling in their journey with Jesus, that their faith might be strengthened, helped by other travellers on this road, and their true worth in God's eyes be fully realised.

SAMPLE