Ash Wednesday
Rolling Meadows - 1964

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 26: 20-25 Now when the even was come, He sat down with the twelve. And as they did eat, He said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray Me. And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto Him, Lord, is it I? And He answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with Me in the dish, the same shall betray Me. The Son of Man goeth as it is written of Him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born. Then Judas, which betrayed Him, answered and said, Master, is it I? And He said unto him, Thou hast said.

LORD, IS IT I?

The Christian's life is a succession of endless beginnings. Our Lord's Word in Revelation, Behold, I make all things new, gives us the leading thought for this holy hour as we enter into another Passiontide. Unless all things are new in Him, everything is shoddy and old - we must carry the burden of our guilt and shame - we are lost in the darkness of our sins. This is the great, eternal glory in the Christian's life - daily the new man comes forth who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever - daily the Old Adam in us dies with his sins and evil lusts. This is the only thing that can bring forth real joy in life, because God gets no glory from anything that we do except that He gets the sinner safe at home in heaven.

You remember the night in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago? It was a great night - the night of the Passover Feast - the night when our Lord personally, and with a warm intimacy, gathered His disciples about Him. You can imagine the hush in the Upper Room when Jesus said to them, With great desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you. Step by step Jesus led them into deep and earnest self-examination. Before He can heal and help and save, they must know their sin and waywardness - they must come face to face with the reality of evil in their hearts - they must know that ~~except for~~ unless they turn to Heaven deeply honest and heart-felt repentance, they could all be guilty of betrayal - they could all become a Judas. And so, Jesus taught them a lesson in humility and brotherly love - washing their feet and drying them with a towel. Thereupon He resumed His place at the head of the table, and with a troubled look on His face, He said: Verily, verily, I say unto you, one of you shall betray Me. Without exception all of the disciples were forced to think about the possibility of betraying their Lord. Every last one of them asked the question: "Lord, is it I?" ~~Without exception~~ they were all compelled to re-examine and

re-evaluate their own discipleship - their own relationship to Christ - their loyalty and commitment and devotion. On every face there was astonishment and grief; that is, on every face except one - the traitor's. Even he played his part well. Approaching Christ he asked: Master, is it I? Whether in earshot of anyone else we do not know, Christ answered, Yes, Thou hast said.

Judas, secure in his sin and willfulness, ~~is~~ goes sent out into the cold, blackness of the night, with the words of JC still singing in his ears - That thou doest, do quickly! And then, out of the grace of His heart - with heaven in His eyes and in His hands - Jesus gave them the living memorial of His everlasting presence in their midst - Take eat, this is My body which is given for you; Take, drink ye all of it, this is My blood...shed for you for the remission of sins.

When a man is bent on evil - there is nothing that anyone can do - even God - to stop him - except love!

Because of the deceptiveness of our human nature, we are all inclined to evade the responsibility for our actions. Rather than ask the question, Lord, is it I? we look for excuses. When confronted with the reality of their sin, many people are quick to reply, Could I help it? The story is told about a Greek philosopher who had just beaten his slave for some mistake or other. The slave protested, Don't you believe that I was predestined to make this mistake? The philosopher thought for a moment and then replied, Yes, and I was predestined to beat you for it

The game of pass-the-buck - evading responsibility for one's mistakes - goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Confronted by the divine question, Adam, why did you do this thing? the man was quick to reply, It wasn't my fault; it was the woman You gave me. The woman said, It wasn't my fault; I was tricked. The tempter might have replied, It wasn't my fault; it was the way You made me and the rest of creation. If you had only made man with the instinct of an animal, instead of with the power of moral choice, this whole thing would not have happened..... Really God, it's Your fault!

If ever there was a man who might have pleaded that he was the helpless victim of circumstances beyond his control, it was Judas Iscariot. He might have said, as people have said for him, Could I help it? Didn't God pick Judas for his

role as the betrayer of Jesus? Doesn't the Bible say that Satan entered into his heart? - That Judas betrayed Jesus in order that the Saciptures might be fulfilled? What part, if any, did Judas play as a man with moral choice in the drama which turned out so tragically for him? Our text tells the story: Now when even was come, He sat down with the twelve. And as they did eat, He said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray Me. And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto Him, Lord, is it I? And He answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with Me in the dish, the same shall betray Me. The Son of Man goeth as it is written of Him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born. Then Judas, which betrayed Him answered and said, Master, is it I? And He said unto him, Thou hast said. This little incident around the table that evening, with the dipping of the hand into the dist, was not an incentive but a deterrent to what Judas had in mind. Judas, however, would not be deterred. Far from reconsidering, he played the part of a complete hypocrite right down to the end: Master, is it I? With unutterable sadness, arising out of the divine recognition that man has it within his power to destroy himself, our Lord answered, Thou hast said!

Man was created to love God. But love cannot be forced. You cannot drive a man to love. Without freedom, there can be no love. God risked everything that we might love Him. The fact that men do not love God, that their natural dispositio is to hate God, cannot be laid at the door of God. God is still love, and He wants to be loved. God is love and His love built a Cross for Himself. It is only when we understand the love of God, and our responsibility for our own actions, that the Cross of Christ makes sense. Out of love God sent forth His Son, a man to die for men. The Son of God lived as men have to live and died as men have to die. He did not have to die, because He was without sin. But He gave His life freely as a ransom for all men. I, if I be lifted up, said Christ, will draw all men unto Myself. The key word is draw. This is the way love works. Even this great sacrifice of love can be annulled by the freedom of men to say No. The question, How could I

help it? is the question of an animal, or a tree, or a stick, or a stone, but not of a man. It is the part of a man to accept responsibility for what he himself has done. The love of God and the Cross of Christ are God's answer to our evasion of responsibility. Christ accepted the whole responsibility for us. He took the punishment of our sins upon Himself. Judas could have found forgiveness - the same as Peter did and the other disciples - but he refused.

Lord, is it I? - The question brings up point blank with reality. It is easy to dull the cutting edge of sin. Just a moment's relaxation - a minor step or two in the wrong direction - a slight angle off the path of righteousness - little deviations — these have greased the skids to hell. After a minister had spoken strongly about sin, one of his members remarked, Speaking so plainly about sin could make real sinners of our boys and girls. Call them 'missteps' or 'mistakes,' if you will, but do not speak so plainly about sin. The minister went to his medicine cabinet and produced a bottle marked poison. He said, I see what you want me to do. You want me to change the label. Suppose I take off this label and substitute another milder one - such as 'Essence of peppermint.' Can't you see what would happen? Take the warning off the label, and you only make the poison more dangerous.

Don't underestimate the power of a little sin, a pet and pampered sin. On the other hand, don't underestimate the power of God - the power of God to cleanse your life by forgiving and removing your sin. The Holy Spirit of God calls to us tonight to trust in Christ the Savior. He wants us as we are. He will not force Himself upon us, but He will take us as we are, and He will give us the power to believe.

I am sure that the Lord turns and looks at us tonight. May we remember as we come to His Table - Just as I am without one plea; But that Thy blood was shed for me; and that Thou bidst me come to Thee; O Lamb of God, I come, I come. If there is need for a flood of tears to wash clean the soul - as each one of us asks himself the question, Lord, is it I? - then let it come, for the joys of tomorrow will be more godly because we have been with Him at His table and we have heard Him say, Take eat; this is My body, given for you. Take drink, this is My bloo

Judas, the betrayer

+ out of a full heart pray,