

Loving beyond betrayal

A sermon on John 13:31-35 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 April 2016

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Message

The love of God seeks us out, even when we least deserve it, and then calls us to love others similarly.

Sermon

As I was reflecting on this week's gospel story, I came across a story in the sports pages of the paper that began as follows:

Leaving the Gabba last Saturday night after what he knew would be his last game for some time, Steven May cut a forlorn figure. The abuse he was subjected to by Brisbane Lions fans – in front of his six-year-old brother, 18-year-old sister and four-year-old cousin – only amplified his sense of shame. ([The Age, 19 April 2016](#))

Do you know that feeling? Steven May had made a split second wrong decision that left another footballer lying unconscious on the ground. He has since accepted his penalty without surprise or objection. The front page of the same day's paper carried the report of another man whose split second wrong decision in a pub brawl left another young footballer dead. There was absolutely no excuse. But who among us hasn't made a decision we've regretted, or stuffed something up really badly and suddenly found that everywhere we look there are accusing eyes and condemning glares? Who among us hasn't slunk away, mortified that we can't turn back the clock and take back that disastrous momentary decision. Maybe for you, the action you are ashamed of wasn't nearly as public as Steven May's, or as disastrous as the one in the pub brawl, but sometimes the fact that almost no one knows makes very little difference to our sense of isolation and shame. It still feels as though the eyes of judgment are following us wherever we go. If you talk to many veterans of the Vietnam War, many of them still shudder at the pain of the way they were sometimes shamed after returning home when the tide of public opinion had turned so against the war.

Or maybe you've felt a bit like that without having done anything wrong or been involved in anything wrong. Sometimes those feelings of being followed by accusing and condemning eyes are not caused by anything we have any reason to feel guilty for. Sometimes the world is cruel and unfair in its judgements and its victimisation. Many of you will have read Rowan's essay this week, describing the prejudice and bullying that he and other transgender kids can face. I hope and pray that Rowan can continue to hold his head high, but unfortunately many young people who are bullied over their sexuality begin to internalise the hatred and slink around, head down, feeling shamed and afraid.

The person who slunk away into the shadows in tonight's gospel reading did so so thoroughly that you may not have noticed him at all. You might even have to look back a few verses before tonight's opening to find out who he was, because our opening line just said, "When *he* had gone out, Jesus spoke, saying...."

When who had gone out? It was Judas Iscariot. He has just slipped off into the night to double-cross Jesus, to turn him over to the conspiring authorities who wanted him dead. The demonic turmoil that had been chewing him up inside has suddenly tipped him over the edge and the deed is done. When Simon Peter, a few hours later, denies ever having known Jesus, we get a more detailed picture of his remorse and shame as he walks the streets through the

night, tears streaming down his face, berating himself for his cowardice and failure. But we know that Judas too was broken by his own action. We hear of him trying to take it back by returning the blood-money he had received, but we have no idea how long he stumbled through the dark streets, cursing himself, tearing his hair out, tormented by the sense of accusing eyes on every side, before his self-loathing drove him to flee into the darkness and hang himself.

Now although this image is only half a line in our reading, I think that we need to hold it in our mind's eye if we are to understand the things that Jesus goes on to say. Jesus knows what has been eating at Judas, and the gospel writer has made it clear that Jesus knows what Judas is slipping away to do, so what Jesus says is a response to the fateful path Judas has just set out on.

The first thing Jesus says at this point is difficult to make sense of unless you have been following closely how John the Evangelist develops particular ideas in this gospel. Jesus says, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once."

What could that be all about? Well, at its simplest, it is just saying "Now we've reached the end of the line, and I'm going to be killed." Because you see, one of the things John does in the way he tells the story is this ironic juxtaposition of images where he takes the idea of "being lifted up in glory" which is what everyone is expecting of the messiah, and tips it on its head and applies it instead to the crucifixion. John is telling us that the glory of God is not seen in some conquering warrior trampling down his enemies, but in a rejected and executed man strung up on a cross to die. The theologian James Alison suggests that the implications of this might be easier for us to grasp if we think of glory in this sentence as meaning reputation. So Jesus would be saying something like, "Now the Son of Man's reputation is made, and God's reputation is made in him. If God's reputation is established in him, God will also cement his reputation in turn, and will do so at once."

So what is it about this moment that is cementing the reputation of Jesus, and through him the reputation of God? Perhaps to answer that, we should read on. Jesus continues, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. If you have love for one another, everyone will recognise that you are my disciples."

Can you hear the "reputation" theme continuing there? If you get a reputation for loving one another, then people will recognise that you must be followers of Jesus because of the reputation that Jesus has for loving others. And in turn, Jesus's reputation for loving reflects on God and shows God to be one who similarly loves, absolutely and no matter what. So what is it about this moment that makes this the moment when Jesus's reputation is made? Well, this is the moment when Jesus had a real choice. Jesus was in a hidden room with at least eleven strong men on his side. This was the moment when he could have saved his own skin by outing Judas and letting the inevitable anger of the mob run its course. Judas could have easily been killed or maimed, and Jesus would have been free to escape the city. That option is not really there once he has been arrested and placed under Roman guard unless he were to call down an army of angels, but here in this hidden upstairs room, he has a choice: love or force, mercy or retribution. And in this moment, Jesus's reputation for extending unshakable love and mercy even to those who are bent on destroying him is made. In another [news story this week](#), I read of a violent young man who had the words "Retaliation is a must" tattooed

on his back. And while maintaining that he was a very nice bloke, he said that “if someone comes and hits my mum, of course I’m going to go shoot the bloke.” “Retaliation is a must.” Not according to Jesus it’s not. Some other things that Jesus said about no one having greater love than the love that lays down its life for others will be quoted and distorted repeatedly in tomorrow’s Anzac Day commemorations to imply that the greatest love is to put one’s own life on the line in trying to destroy those who would harm us, but Jesus will have none of that. Jesus’s love and mercy for all are unshakable, even if we turn on him and betray him. He goes on to say, “Those you gave me, Father, I have loved, even to the end.” And thus is his reputation made. Thus is he glorified as he is betrayed, lynched, and strung up to die, still praying for God’s forgiveness for those who are nailing his flesh to the woodwork. “Those you gave me, Father, I have loved, even to the end.”

Now there is an interesting question raised by the fact that it was the moment when Judas cracked and betrayed him that prompted him to tell us “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” What about Judas? For the most part, we have spent the last two thousand years continuing to glare accusingly at Judas; continuing to shame him and shun him and drive him to the point of self-destruction. But is that how Jesus would treat Judas and how he would have us treat Judas? Surely not. Surely if Jesus chooses this moment to tell us that we should love others as he has loved us, then the love and mercy he showed to Judas even to the end are in fact the model of love that he is calling us to follow now.

Did any of the other disciples on that night respond to his words by going out looking for Judas? Did any of them go out like shepherds searching the dark hellholes of shame and despair for the lost sheep of a brother who they had spend the last three years travelling with? Would any of us? Perhaps this sort of question confronts us with the enormity of the challenge of loving others as Jesus has loved us. I know that there have been a couple of people over the years who have slipped out of this door and who I felt betrayed me on the way out, seemingly doing their best to destroy me in their anger as they departed. And I can’t stand up here and tell you that I have continued to search for them and pray for them and continued to try to love them and seek reconciliation with them. If I am honest, I thought I was doing pretty well not pursuing them with a desire to make them pay, but I clearly haven’t got anywhere near loving them with the kind of constantly searching and yearning love that the good shepherd has shown to me. And that surely he is showing to Judas.

In the resurrection stories, John tells us how Jesus sought out Simon Peter while he was still wracked with guilt and shame over his denial of Jesus. We enact their conversation at the end of our liturgy during this Paschal season, as Jesus asks Simon Peter three times whether he loves him, giving Simon Peter the chance to systematically reverse this three denials, and find himself loved and forgiven and recommissioned by Jesus to be an ambassador of that love and mercy. Would Jesus have done any differently for Judas? The story can’t tell us because the opportunity wasn’t there – Judas had already killed himself. But surely each time the risen Jesus met with his disciples, around the table in the upstairs room or around the campfire on the beach, surely his heart was breaking for the empty space where Judas had once sat. Surely the one who would leave the ninety nine and go searching every last hellhole of bitterness, shame and despair to find and rescue the lost one was aching to go out and bring Judas home and back to the table of love.

And surely as we gather here around this table with our risen Lord tonight, we gather here with all those who have gone before us, not only those we revere as saints, but with Judas and

all those who like Judas, and who like us, have failed and denied and betrayed and slunk off into a night of shame and despair, and whose restoration to the table of love and mercy is no more deserved than our welcome to the table of love and mercy. For here is love and mercy so scandalously generous and so utterly resilient that no failure and no shame and no self-destruction can tip us beyond its reach. Here is the love and mercy that can suffer the worst we can do and still keep rising up and searching for us in every hell we have fled to. Here is the love and mercy that is the glory of God, that embraces even Judas, even me, even you. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have this kind of love for one another.”