

'In remembrance of her'

29.03.15, St Andrew's Chesterton

"One day I'm going to do something that will change the whole system, and everyone will know my name and remember"

We all know his name now – Andreas Lubitz. We know what he looks like; we're beginning to build a picture of his personal history and psychological makeup. He – and what he has done – will not be forgotten, certainly not by 150 grieving families, including his own. His name was Andrew – Andreas – a name we know and love in this church. It seems that he deliberately took not just his own life but the lives of 150 men, women and children. And we all want to know why? Why? Was he ill, did he have a mental condition? Was he a suicide bomber thinking he was doing something noble? Was he wholly responsible for his actions? Or was he evil? And if he was did that come from inside of him or somehow was that evil bigger than him; was he in some way possessed by a force or forces beyond his control?

We remember our Andrew for better things, for good news; we remember the other disciples too by name, or some of them anyway – Simon Peter, John, James, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew and then we get a bit vague don't we? But there's one other disciple we all remember though we don't always associate him with the others; we perhaps forget that he was one of the Twelve, because we don't remember him for good news but for bad. I am speaking, of course, of Judas, Judas Iscariot.

¹⁰Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.

We remember Judas. No doubt Mr & Mrs Iscariot remembered lots of things about him, including lots of lovely things, just as Herr & Frau Lubitz will always have lots of memories of their son, painfully lovely ones. But most of the rest of the world remember Judas and will remember Andreas for just one thing, one awful thing.

And don't underestimate what Judas did. He knew the consequences of what he was doing; he knew that the authorities had been seeking a way to put Jesus to death; he knew in a culture where brotherly love and loyalty meant everything that he was betraying what people held sacred. But we could ask – and people have asked – the same questions I asked earlier. Was he ill, did he have a mental condition? Did he think he was doing something noble? Was he wholly responsible for his actions? Or was he evil? And if he was did that come from inside of him or somehow was that evil bigger than him; was he in some way possessed by a force or forces beyond his control?

In Judas's case I think the clue lies in his end. There are two accounts of this in the New Testament but it seems most likely that he killed himself – which suggests two things to me. (1) That he realised that what he had done was a terrible evil and (2) That while he was doing it he had failed to realise this. I suspect that his suicide was a mixture of shame and guilt.

St John records that 'the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.' (13.2) St Luke says much the same (22.3). Is this, as some believe, the early church darkening the name of a man misunderstood and demonised? I don't think so. The New Testament, I think, draws a discrete veil over Judas and his memory. To say that the devil entered into him isn't demonising him any more than Jesus demonised Peter by saying to him 'Get behind me, Satan'. What they are trying to say is that Judas was the tool of a greater evil than he could possibly have imagined. Most acts of evil are done in part wilfully, in part also in ignorance and stupidity and in part through being duped and deceived. That is true of our wretched actions as well as those of

Judas or Andreas. The evil is bigger than we are; it is real, real enough to give it a name, Satan or the Devil. Does that excuse us or Judas or Andreas? No, we are still culpable, it was still us and them who did it, co-operated in it and fulfilled it. Judas may have been duped, may have never fully realised the consequence of his actions, but he didn't do the modern thing of evading responsibility by blaming others – the system, the duplicitous power, his parents. They may or may not have had a share in responsibility – those who paid him certainly did. But he did it and knew he must ultimately take the blame, but perhaps in that acceptance of responsibility – if that's what it was – there is a glimmer of redemption. Perhaps Judas in the end can be forgiven.

But I never intended to talk about Judas this morning. It was not such terrible news that drew me to this passage, for most of it is about the good news.

'Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

In truth we are not sure of her name. In Mark it just says 'a woman'; John, if it's the same occasion, speaks of Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha anointing Jesus's feet (rather than his head); tradition has said that this was Mary Magdalene. So we're not sure who the 'her' is; we're not sure whether she anointed Jesus's head or his feet or both, but what we do know is that did something amazingly considerate and loving and beautiful that Jesus treasured as he was approaching the crisis of his end. That precious ointment became an outpouring of sweet-smelling love; it was sacramental for Jesus, a physical bestowal of an inward grace. Sacramental – a mirror image of 'in remembrance of him'; we tell this story 'in remembrance of her'. She begun the chain of events of Holy Week, pouring out love and grace upon Jesus; paving the way for his pouring his love and grace upon us.

Note the role of women in all of this. If the central figure in the story of our salvation is male then there is a recurring theme of an almost symbiotic relationship between Jesus and the key women in his life: from his mother in his infancy to Mary Magdalene at his tomb. And here it is a woman who anoints him. I'm not sure you know that we tell this story enough and have yet worked out why Jesus saw it as significant that it would be told the world over. Perhaps it's appropriate in this week when two more women bishops have been announced – because surely in this anointing the woman is acting out a role that was distinctly priestly if not high priestly, or in our terms, archiepiscopal. It wasn't anybody who anointed kings or priests for their role – perhaps only now we're digesting the full significance of this good news story and learning to tell it as it is.