

Three Lives

St. Paul must have been quite a character. Through his letters we know more about him than any other New Testament figure besides Jesus, and because Jesus left no writings, we probably know Paul better. What a church leader he would have made – in and out of prison, prone to causing riots, preaching so long that a young man went to sleep and fell out of a window. When that happened Paul paused long enough to check on the poor man and then resumed preaching until daybreak. I don't think I'll try that.

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi gives a good snapshot of his personality. Paul truly loved those people and they loved him. He didn't need to justify himself, but he still felt compelled to point out how much better his Jewish credentials were than anybody else's. Characteristically, as soon as he finished boasting about his pedigree he threw it away for the sake of Jesus Christ, calling his credentials rubbish. The actual Greek word is more crude. Paul never forgot getting the wind knocked out of him on the Damascus road, when it took him three days without food or water to get his head straightened out.

How different Paul was from Judas Iscariot! Judas was also a close follower of Jesus but grew weary of the journey. One gets the impression that Judas eased the pain by buying comforts for himself out of the common purse. Perhaps like many embezzlers, he thought he could replace the stolen money before the loss was discovered. No wonder he complained so loudly when Mary, the sister of Martha, poured such costly perfume all over the feet of Jesus! Judas could have used that money. What's worse is that he pretended to be good, expressing a false concern for the poor in order to cover up his wickedness.

Mary herself acted more like Paul. She remembered what life was like before she met Jesus and didn't want to go back. She had a deep, abiding gratitude for this man who had brought her brother Lazarus back to life. She responded to Jesus with joy and love.

So today we have three clearly drawn characters: Paul, Judas, and Mary. It would be easy to assign praise and blame, but I think it's more honest to say that we have qualities of each of them in ourselves. When things go well it can be hard not to boast like Paul. When things don't go well, there's always the temptation to cut corners. That's probably how Judas got started, taking a little at first, then a bit more, and before long it became habitual. We may not do that with money, but "this little bit won't hurt" is a common excuse by which many sins become habitual. Each of us in our own way has to consistently resist the power of temptation.

Mary I see as an icon of gratitude – extravagant gratitude. She was responding to the overflowing love that Jesus had shown her. Even if we cannot pour costly perfume on Jesus, we can thankfully give back to God what God has given us. We can serve those whom Jesus served, the poor and the outcast, and we can give some of what we have earned to ensure that God continues to be glorified in this beautiful cathedral.

Judas did have the opportunity to repent and turn back toward God before his final betrayal. It's important to remember that. God's grace is always open to us because God is always seeking us out. So as you travel through these last days of Lent, remember Mary's love, the tragedy of Judas, and Paul's straining forward, pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

[Lent 5: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8.]