

Hope for Judas

God's Boundless Mercy for Us All

Christoph Wrembek, S.J.


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A word to the readers

The little book offers more than you might assume at first glance. Maybe you found the title to be somewhat surprising: “Hope for Judas” . . .

Judas? The son of destruction?

Judas, about whom the Gospels tell us very little beyond the dramatic events in the course of the Passion, in him, Jesus’ loving-saving action finds its culmination?

Drawing from a depiction on the beautifully carved top of a column (in architectural terms, a capital¹) in the medieval Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene in the town of Vézelay, France, much is awaiting you: a breathtaking, enlightening and, no doubt, oftentimes touching journey through different core stories of sacred scripture. Stories about being lost, but ultimately always stories about salvation. Be patient and let yourself be taken on a tour into the soul of the Gospel, which is Jesus himself. A treasure chest of faith, of spirituality and of direction might open for your life.

What does the book offer you? You will come to know the fascinating story of the origin of this capital, you will

1. A “capital” is the upper part, or the head, of a pillar or column. The term derives from Latin *capitellum*, literally “little head.” For images of the capital in Vézelay, turn to the picture on page 127, and the close-up picture on the bottom of page 15.

accompany Jesus in his encounter with the woman at Jacob's well, and you will discover in a new way the parables of the three "lost ones" – the lost son, the lost sheep and the lost coin. You will find out that there is much to be discovered in Jesus' interactions with Zacchaeus, with the tax collector, and with the crippled woman.

All these encounters and stories can be read in view of Judas. In all of them, the motif of salvation shines through, salvation for even the most *lost* soul of all, because the Creator does not give up on anyone.

Salvation and redemption, therefore, also for Judas? At the end of this booklet you will find a surprising answer. Wonderful and heartening. Carved in stone in the unique depiction of the "Good Shepherd of Vézelay." Visible to the eye, palpable to the heart.

Therein lies an incredible hope. Whichever way our own life may have taken, with all its inconsistencies, we, too, may be able to say in the end: "You, who have taken Judas home, carry me, too!" And if we are not able to bring ourselves to say these words – HE carries home also the one who cannot speak. Everyone. Me, too.

Introduction

For years, I have been captivated by a picture. It occupies a prominent place in my study. It accompanies my thinking and my musing, my theological reflecting, and my personal prayer. It nourishes my loving and, like a deep well, is ever new. The picture shows a capital, the artistically carved top of a column. It is found in the Romanesque abbey church of St. Mary Magdalene in the town of Vézelay, in Burgundy, France. On the left side of the artistic depiction we see Judas who has hanged himself, and to the right, a shepherd who carries the dead Judas over his shoulder, like the lost sheep. I call it “the Good Shepherd of Vézelay.” It became the inspiration for this book.

Almost 900 years old, this medieval capital deserves more than just a quick glance. It deserves all our attention because it contains the whole of God’s message of salvation and redemption. We are seeing the very being and the very heart of Christian theology, in a way words could not convey any more beautifully, any more powerfully, or any more touchingly.

Just think: In earlier centuries, people had neither binoculars nor cameras. Surely only very few would even have looked up that far to the top of a column, in the shadow of the ceiling. There were many other images to look at, bathed in more light than this one. The unknown sculptor of this capital, his senses imbued with a faith yearning for truth, had created something that remained unnoticed, hidden in the protective shadow. It was too high and too distant.

In our days this seemingly plain yet profoundly expressive image of our faith gets much more attention. It adorns booklets or serves as an image for meditation for those who are searching. Important experts did discover it but did not “notice” its significance. In many art guides, it is not even mentioned since there seems to be nothing important in it. Other capitals in the Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene seem more interesting, even though their themes and symbolic meaning are often not easily understood. Instead, the message of this depiction is immediately evident. The Good Shepherd, Jesus, as he identified himself, is carrying Judas home like the lost sheep. Most scenes on the church’s capitals capture themes from the Old Testament or from mythology, but this well-known motif of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, undoubtedly belongs to the New Testament.

This unfamiliar and unusual depiction can be contrasted with another image of Judas. This other image is found only fifty-six miles southeast of Vézelay in the church of St. Lazarus in Autun, built around the same time as the Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene, between 1120 and 1140 CE. The patrons of the two churches, Mary Magdalene and Lazarus, were siblings but the two depictions of Judas in them have nothing in common! In the school of Gislebert, the sculptor who so richly decorated St. Lazarus, Judas is depicted as hanged and at his feet, on his right and left, two satanic demons hungrily crave their prey. In the Vézelay basilica, the unknown sculptor shows the opposite. He does not depict Satan and his demons taking the hanged Judas as prey with them to hell, but rather the Good Shepherd who carries Judas home like a trophy.

In Vézelay, an overall plan for the images in St. Mary Magdalene has never been found, but the preparatory work for the capitals is assumed to have been done by a significant scholar of the time. Research points to Peter the Venerable,

an impressive personality of his century. At age twenty-one (in 1115) he was named Prior of the Cloister in Vézelay, and at twenty-eight he became the ninth abbot of the Abbey Cloister of Cluny, the center of the medieval renewal movement of monastic life. He had great human sensitivity, was deeply pious and theologically outstanding (he had the Qur'an translated into Latin), and he gave asylum in Cluny to another brilliant loner of his time: Peter Abelard.

If Peter the Venerable indeed gave inspiration to the capitals, we need to ask if Peter Abelard's life-journey could have been a vivid inspiration for this unique depiction of Judas. So, allow me to take you on an expedition, a brief summary of this fascinating story.

Abelard prided himself in being a great philosopher and master in dialectics, the debating of the truth of opinions. In 1115, he taught in Paris. The great crowds of students who followed him confirmed him in his vain self-image. This necessarily led to opposition, even more so since Abelard attempted to integrate reason with faith. Among his students was Héloïse, extremely gifted intellectually as well as extraordinarily beautiful, the niece of the influential Canon Fulbert. She, too, admired and adored the philosopher. After an initial serious, morally correct teacher-student relationship, Abelard discovered that aside from dialectics and logic, sensual pleasures had also awakened in him. Thus, Héloïse and Abelard became one of the most famous, most scandalous, and most incomprehensible pair of lovers in history. Both were aflame for each other with body, spirit, and soul. Héloïse loved him from the beginning with a passionate (and as time would show), lifelong and unconditional love. They soon became a couple.

When she bore him a son, Abelard sent her away to his family. His sensuality had not grown into responsible love even though, to appease Fulbert, he married Héloïse sacra-

mentally. In punishment for what Abelard had done to his family's reputation, Héloïse's outraged father clandestinely sent men to have him castrated.

At Abelard's insistence, for her protection but against her own wishes, Héloïse entered the convent. Even though far removed and without contact for many years, her love for the beloved never diminished. Eventually, she became the Abbess of the Paraclete Cloister, founded by Abelard.

Humiliated though he was, Abelard continued teaching. In 1141, not without intrigue, and with the consent of Bernard of Clairvaux, the Synod of Sens declared Abelard a heretic. He was now a broken man, all vanity extinguished. He became known as a great sinner, a heretic excluded from the Church. His life was destroyed and hopeless. He initially planned to go to Rome to appeal to the pope. However, he set out for Cluny where Peter the Venerable was Abbot. His pilgrimage to Cluny led him through the town of Vézelay, where a year before the church had been completed, still without the narthex (the entrance hall). We may wonder . . . did he enter there and look up to his right? Did he recognize himself in Judas, the one who in his hopelessness had hanged himself? Did he see the shepherd too . . .? Yet unlike Judas, Abelard had not handed Jesus over; he even sought, like his master, to bring reason into faith. He did not hang himself, but public opinion of the day had "hanged" him, so to speak.

He knocked at the door in Cluny and together with beggars and pilgrims asked for a bed. But Peter the Venerable recognized who was seeking refuge with him and welcomed him in honor. Just one year later, on April 21, 1142, Abelard died. Peter the Venerable had the greatness and freedom of soul to personally inform Abelard's rightful wife, by now Abbess Héloïse ("my dearest sister in our Lord") of the passing of "the man who belongs to you." At the end of his letter to

the Abbess, he wrote: “He, to whom you are joined through the bond of the flesh, then through the firmer and stronger bond of divine love, he, with whom and under whom you consecrated yourself to the service of God, he, I say, will today be embraced instead of by you, by God in love, as your other self. And on the day of the coming of the Lord, at the voice of the archangel, at the sound of the trumpet which announces the highest judge coming down from heaven, he in his grace will return him to you – he will keep him for you.”

Héloïse requested Abelard’s body from the Abbey in Cluny, and Peter the Venerable had the corpse *discreetly* taken from the cemetery, accompanying it himself to the wife, the Abbess of the Paraclete Cloister. Once more he had to pass through Vézelay, maybe looking up to the capital he had probably given inspiration to, seeing the Good Shepherd carrying home on his shoulders the greatest of all sinners. Thus, he now carried Abelard home – until God would give him back to his wife.

Just think: the Good Shepherd carries not *any* man, but Judas, “the son of destruction!” The one, who, according to tradition, could not be redeemed. Yet it is not tradition that has the last word, but God.

In this book, I want to look at the question: how did Jesus treat sinners? Did he exclude them because of their sins and say: “You do not deserve that I have communion with you and you with me. You need to first do penance and repent!”? Didn’t Jesus also threaten? Didn’t he say something about being “thrown into the everlasting fire of hell, where Satan and his angels are awaiting?”

Surely being Christian means leading a life in conformity with the call we have received, day after day, from morning to night. Only then can one refer, just as the Church herself does, to Jesus Christ and his Gospel. And what

happens with those who, while confessing in words to be Christian, act and lead a life to the contrary in fundamental things, in ways that are clearly against what Jesus intended? Do not those who refuse to forgive another act against Jesus' teaching? Do not ones who act like this, in these cases, have no more communion with Jesus, the Messiah?

What about Judas, the prototype of all sinners?

Hovering above this book, high above and at the same time directly in front of our eyes, is the image of the "Good Shepherd of Vézelay." He carries home Judas, the greatest of all sinners. But there is something special that the unknown sculptor added to his picture, a unique treasure which, it seems to me, has not been discovered by anyone up to now. And it is improbable that Peter the Venerable would have been able to transmit something of such subtlety to the sculptor, had he been the one who gave inspiration to this capital. I believe it must have come from the artist himself. In earlier centuries though, no one could have discovered this subtlety.

When I discovered it, I froze.

At the end of this book I will make visible, truly visible to the eye, what the profound, surely mystically gifted sculptor depicted so beyond the obvious, nearly 900 years ago. It is a most beautiful expression of theology, carved in stone. It is the whole Gospel – perhaps bigger and better than words could ever express.

*Hannover, on the Feast of
St. Mary Magdalene, Apostle, 2017
Christoph Wrembek, S.J.*

*Top right: depiction of Judas in St. Lazarus/Autun
Bottom right: depiction of Judas in St. Mary Magdalene/Vézelay*



Jesus and the woman who was divorced five times

In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham (it is God's voice speaking through him) calls the rich, self-absorbed man "my child," like a compassionate caring father who suffers with him. To Judas, Jesus will say one day in Gethsemane: "My friend. . ." But to Peter, to whom Jesus will entrust the care of his brothers, he says: "Get behind me, Satan!"

And yet, later he asks Peter: "Do you love me?"

It seems that the further someone is away from God, the more lovingly God approaches. Indeed, God is driven by only one motive, revealing the essence of his being, not because the person merits it – because, in fact, there is no merit – but because that person is in absolute need of God's loving attention.

Justice gives what a person deserves; mercy gives what a person needs. Such is the heart of God.

The New Testament often speaks of sinners. Of great sinners, too. Let us take a closer look at the encounter of such a person with Jesus. It is a woman, probably a sinner, maybe even a great sinner. Strangely enough, though, in the whole story this qualification never comes up – as though it was not important for Jesus. She is a human being, a human being in distress. And thus, she experiences the utmost attention from Jesus the Messiah. God gives his *communio*, his communion – building nearness first to those who most need it.

The external circumstances are important in this report that John passed on to us in the fourth chapter of his Gospel because they corresponded to what was happening internally. Here too, like so often in John's Gospel, he presents subtle, coherent details which show that he was an eyewitness. For that I am deeply grateful to him. The other evangelists were familiar with this scene as well; some might even have been present, but they did not regard it worth writing down. Maybe they did not dare to announce publicly what had been revealed in the protected space of non-believers, in a Samaritan village.

Jesus was at the well of Sychar in the midday heat. He had just been with his disciples at the Jordan river. His men had been baptizing – gaining even more popularity than John the Baptist with his followers – and that led to nervousness among the Pharisees. They wondered: “Is this yet a second movement outside the system?” That was too much! Jesus himself had not stood in the water and baptized. His method did not include baptizing with water. Later, when he sends out the disciples, we never hear him advise them to baptize. No, he says: “Heal the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God!” (Mt 10:7-8, Lk 9:2) For that, obviously, no baptism was needed.

Heal the sick? Proclaim the kingdom of God? Had not his men gained such great success *baptizing*?

Does not God's Holy Spirit sometimes allow the old and numerically strong to disappear, because he wants to bring about something new, still small in numbers, but closer to the original plan of God's kingdom?

We are not told which disciples were with Jesus. They are simply called “apostles.” Was Judas among them? Judas seems to be the only one of the apostles who came from the south, from Kariōt, the desert to the southeast of Hebron. Would that make him something like an outsider, a stranger