

**St Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake**  
**Palm Sunday, year 'C'**  
**10 April, 2022**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd* is a musical adaptation of Melville's well-known novella of the same name which recounts the tragic story of the eponymous character who is a young, innocent, and beautiful sailor. His goodness and beauty arouse in John Claggart, the ship's wicked and sadistic Sergeant-at-Arms, feelings of desire, desire which he cannot—or dare not—acknowledge. In fact, he is so desperate to hide from these feelings—or to keep them hidden—that he vows to destroy Billy.

Britten gives Claggart a powerful aria in which he sings,

*The light shines in the darkness and the darkness comprehends it and suffers. O beauty, O handsomeness, goodness! Would that I had never seen you! Having seen you, what choice remains to me? None, none! I'm doomed to annihilate you, I'm vowed to your destruction. I will wipe you off the face of the earth, off this ship where fortune has led you. First I will trouble your happiness. I will mutilate and silence the body where you dwell."*

And then, chillingly, at the end,

*For what hope remains if love can escape? If love still lives and grows strong where I cannot enter, what hope is there in my own dark world for me?"*

Or, as Oscar Wilde wrote, "For each man kills the thing he loves."

That pretty much sums up Judas whose kiss of betrayal was also a kiss of desire. Probably not erotic desire, but desire nonetheless. There's no doubt Jesus had awakened in him and the other disciples a desire to change. A desire to grow closer to God. A desire, even, to die to an old way of being and embrace a new life. And I can't help but wonder if this was why Judas betrayed Jesus. Because in the long run he, like Claggart, sought to hide from this desire to change and to keep hidden the things which threatened his comfort in a false security.

On Good Friday, we'll hear familiar words from the prophet Isaiah: "There was nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Except there *was* something about Jesus that people did—and do—desire: his deep connection with God, his goodness, his forgiving love. There's so much in Jesus that we desire to imitate and we know—and this is the point of this passion story—we *know* the only way to possess them is, paradoxically, to lose ourselves for the sake of the other. Yet our frailty, our pettiness, and our cowardice makes us afraid of doing that.

Let's not forget that the other disciples betrayed Jesus, too—even if their betrayals were less murderous. "Why are you sleeping?" Jesus asked. For them there was no

keeping vigil with an agonized friend—they ignored the suffering person who was right next to them. And, when push came to shove, they abandoned him and denied him. At least Judas was bold enough to publicly betray Jesus. So even if the other disciples' betrayals were less murderous, they were somehow even more bitter: they betrayed him with cowardice, fecklessness, and flight.

This week that same ineluctable question is asked of us: Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial. Or to put it another way, can we wake up to the truth that life is to be lived in service of others? Can we look at the desires the Holy One awakens in us and claim them? Or, having seen in him our deepest desire, will we, like the disciples, sleep through the agony—or flee in fear—as we try to save our lives rather than lose them? Even worse will we, like Claggart, seek to deal with Jesus by crucifying within ourselves truth and beauty and goodness?

There's no doubt that the unsettling events of this week arouse within us equally unsettling feelings. Yet no matter how we try to evade them, the only way to be at peace is to *own* how unsettled we feel and acknowledge that we *do* desire to know and be loved by the God Jesus called Father. But that admission is costly since we're talking about a love so amazing, so divine that it demands nothing less than our souls, our lives, our all. Even so, maybe this week we *can* stay awake and even walk with him to Calvary, keeping our eyes open so that we may see and learn anew that to walk the way of the cross is to walk the way of life and peace.