

This photo is available
in the print version of Consumerism.

Guercino's powerful image invites us not only to recognize our motivations to act selfishly, but also to return to the forgiving and compassionate Christ.

Guercino (1591-1666), THE BETRAYAL OF CHRIST, c. 1621. Oil on canvas, 115.3 x 142.2 cm. Given by Capt. R. Langton Douglas, 1924. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Horror and Invitation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Judas negotiated Christ's betrayal for thirty pieces of silver, a slave's value in Exodus 21:32 and the cynical payment to buy off a good shepherd in Zechariah 11:12, then looked for his best chance to deliver the goods (Matthew 26:14-16). The seventeenth-century Baroque artist Guercino depicts that moment of opportunity in the garden of Gethsemane. Christ has just said to Judas, who cowers in the left foreground with the bag of silver, "Friend, do what you are here to do," and the soldiers lay hands on Jesus (26:50).

Typically artists depict the kiss of Judas (Matthew 26:49, Mark 14:45, Luke 22:47) or Peter cutting off a soldier's ear (Matthew 26:51, Mark 14:47, Luke 22:50). Guercino instead focuses this dramatic and theatrically lit painting on the emotional exchange between Judas and Christ. Judas watches, horrified, as the soldier to his left drops a rope around Christ's neck. The drama is heightened in the painting by a compositional diagonal that continually draws our eyes back and forth between Christ and Judas, emphasizing this climactic moment in their relationship.

How Judas got to this point and what happened to him after this event is handled differently by the gospel writers. Matthew (26:14-16), Mark (14:10-11), and Luke (22:3-6) agree Judas's motive included money. Only Matthew's gospel mentions his remorse (27:3-10). "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood," Judas told the chief priests and elders, but they had no sympathy for him. In anger he threw the pieces of silver in the temple, then went and hung himself. The passage is powerful in its abrupt tone. Like Guercino, Matthew portrays Judas's painful loathing for what he has done.

Although Judas was motivated by selfish ambition and greed, this is a human failing for which he could have sought forgiveness. Judas went to the wrong person(s) for pardon. The apostle Peter was rehabilitated after denying Christ because he sought forgiveness from the only one who can grant it—Christ. Guercino depicts the face of Christ as full of forgiveness and with a sense of calm; Judas, blinded by his own panic and dismay, cannot see that compassion. Unforgiven by the priests and elders, and filled with frustration, guilt, and shame, he destroyed himself.

We are among the intended audience for Matthew's gospel and Guercino's painting. They invite us not only to recognize our motivations to act selfishly, but also to return to the forgiving and compassionate Christ.