

The Kiss of Judas

Reflections on Giotto di Bondone's *Kiss of Judas* (Arena Chapel, 1304-06) and
Duccio di Buoninsegna's *The Betrayal of Christ* (Maesta Altarpiece, 1308-11)

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Kiss of Judas (Giotto)



The Betrayal of Christ (Duccio)

Jesus was still speaking when a crowd arrived, led by Judas, one of the twelve disciples. He came up to Jesus to kiss him. But Jesus said, 'Judas, is it with a kiss that you betray the Son of Man?' When the disciples who were with Jesus saw what was going to happen, they asked, 'Shall we use our swords, Lord?' And one of them struck the High Priest's slave and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'Enough of this!' He touched the man's ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and the elders who had come there to get him, 'Did you have to come with swords and clubs, as though I were an outlaw? I was with you in the Temple every day, and you did not try to arrest me. But this is your hour to act, when the power of darkness rules.'

(*Luke 22:47-53*)

Duccio di Buoninsegna's *The Betrayal of Christ* (Maesta Altarpiece, 1308-11) presents an immediate wealth of religious symbolism. One's vision is instantaneously arrested by the brilliance of Christ's cloak. The startling blue of this garment speaks directly to our primordial imagination of the sky above—infinite, unknowable. Symbolically this is the divine infinitude, the virginal plenitude from whence Christ is born and which remains constant as the mysterious substratum of existence. Around this blue burns the gold rimming at once both sunrise and sunset, simultaneously setting ablaze the horizon. This golden "sun" is both the phenomenal sun that speaks of the daily cycle and also the Divine Sun that remains always the Centre, its rays—none other than the Holy Spirit—reaching out to pluck forth existence from the Divine Substance.

One must not, however, fall prey to thinking that this type of symbolic reading is no more than arbitrary association of sign and significance, as if true symbolism could be simply arbitrary. By way of an example of this point: Duccio uses ultra marine as the colour of Christ's cloak; this pigment, reserved for the colour of the Virgin's cloak, is made from ground lapis lazuli, which, as Mircea Eliade has remarked, is '*the cosmic symbol above all others (the starry night)*';¹ this then recalls the *Maris Stella*, and in turn, the association between the symbolism of the sea and the sky. This web of symbolic homologues works to reinforce the primarily efficaciousness of the chromatic nature of ultra marine, which absorbs light, and thus vision, creating a

depth that the viewer disappears into like a drop into the ocean. In the final analysis it is the chromatic effect of Duccio's colours that holds the key to their symbolism, which is firstly and foremost, the intuitive feeling they evoke.

To continue with the symbolism of Duccio's *Betrayal of Christ*. Beneath Christ's marvellous cloak his inner garment is the red of the Passion, the colour of the mortal blood that must flow to prove his humanity. Then there is the structure of Duccio's depiction, complementarily spatial and temporal. Stark against the sky, three trees rise up to hold court over the proceeding events. These throw attention to several other ternary groupings that rush us through the coming hours to the three crosses rising at Golgotha. These trees again flag the three-stage narrative of the whole scene. Sequentially these are the central betraying kiss, the anger of Peter as he slashes out at the servant's ear to the right of Christ, and the fleeing disciples at Christ's left.

In comparison, and at first glance, Giotto di Bondone's *Kiss of Judas* (Arena Chapel, 1304-06) might appear to lack the wealth of symbolism evident in Duccio's painting. The colours of Christ's garments—again the blue and red—are obscured, hidden under the enveloping embrace of Judas. Likewise the symbolic division into three-fold space is lost in the dark mass of Giotto's arresting mob. Yet Giotto's depiction asserts a profundity that resonates deep within the heart. Giotto's painting speaks directly, like the colours themselves. His *Kiss of Judas* is less concerned with an intellectual, in the modern sense of the word, symbolism and far less with "realism." Instead Giotto expresses the Real through the reality of Jesus Christ as human. At the centre of the scene Jesus gazes silently upon Judas' face, while around and outside this silence rushes the tumultuous chaos of the mob. In this gaze, this eternal moment, Giotto's Christ is alive. Not life-like, as realism strives for, but alive: living, breathing, grieving, hurting. Christ is human, precisely what the Passion necessarily expresses. In comparison Duccio's painting suddenly appears almost formulaic, although this is far too harsh a criticism to level against such a master. Giotto's living, human Jesus embodies the truth of God more immediate than any signal-signified symbolism might ever achieve. This is not to deny the pre-eminence

¹ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* London: Sheed and Ward, 1983, p.271.

of symbolism among the sacred sciences. In fact, if symbolism is properly understood then Christ is the Christian symbol *par excellence*. While sacred symbolism is the language of communication with God, Christ's life is the Word immediate and direct.



It is St. John who verbally "paints" the scene that Giotto embodies in plaster, water, and pigments: 'So Judas went to the garden, taking with him a group of Roman soldiers, and some temple guards sent by the chief priests and the Pharisee; they were armed and carried lanterns and torches' (John 18:3). But it is St. Luke who gives a sense of the pangs of human hurt that Jesus suffers at being betrayed by one of his apostles: 'He drew near to Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?'' (Luke 22:47). Jesus does not let Judas actually kiss him: '*but* Jesus said to him'. This denial tends towards a sense of Christ's humanity; it evokes Jesus' pain at this betrayal. It could be suggested that this denial of the kiss is shown in Duccio's painting. Jesus' right arm appears to be holding Judas at bay. Yet the gesture of the hand is that of a blessing. This action may show Christ's healing of the servant's ear. Again, this blessing may express Christ's forgiveness of Judas. Indubitably this action is manifold in significance.

There can be no doubt Christ forgave his betrayer for what in the end is a tragic necessity. This sense of forgiveness is evident in both Duccio's and Giotto's depictions. But, whereas in Giotto the gaze of Jesus expresses both forgiveness and sorrow, in Duccio's Son of Man there appears to be little feeling for Judas and his actions. Christ's immediate blessing and forgiveness appear almost compulsory, his eyes staring off instead to the imminent future. Maybe this shows the attitude of a man resigned to his fate. If this portrayal is seen in terms of Christ's human nature then this resignation implies a will steeled and detached from the external events. This is to depict Christ as superhuman, which sets his example beyond the norm. Alternatively, seen in terms of Christ's divine nature, this resignation implies a transcendence of the oncoming events. This is to depict Christ as suprahuman, which is to fall prey to the docetic heresy. In either case this resignation in the face of death

belies Jesus' human nature. If Duccio's Christ is suprahuman then he denies the very humanity of the Passion. If he is human then his withdrawal robs him of the compassion that is fundamental to the heart of Christianity.

The Passion embodies two main themes: the humanity of Jesus Christ and the infallible necessity of the Divine Will. This sense of God's Will is found prominent in St. Matthew when Christ reprimands Peter for striking off the ear of the high priest's slave: 'all who live by the sword must die by the sword. Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scripture's be fulfilled, that it must be so?' (Matt. 26:51). Again, in St. John: 'Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?'' (John 18:11). The mention of "the cup" recalls Christ's earlier pray to God: 'Father, ...my Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14.36). This episode is one of the most personal and humanly revealing moments in the life of Jesus. At the same time it is the most fundamental lesson on the nature of the Divine Will.

Both masters capture Peter's act of violence and so doing recall the above scriptural teachings on Divine Will. Yet again it is Giotto who captures this action not only as a symbol, but also as a living moment in time. To explain this further it is necessary to understand the mechanics of time each painting uses.

Duccio's painting tells the gospel story of Christ's arrest though a progression of time. Time follows a linear movement corresponding to the path of the eye as our attention is directed from event to event. Central to the painting is the image of Christ. Notably this is the only human figure whose attitude of body and stance indicates a sense of stability. Christ then is the anchor, set out of time and around which time may flow. Of course we, as the viewer, exist ourselves in time, and so immediately we must leave Christ. One's eyes move next to Judas. This movement proceeds from Christ's face through to Judas' face and simultaneously through the physical surge of Judas' body. Here, the point of departure from Christ is situated at the crossing of arms between himself and Judas. One's eyes then progress

horizontally into the bunching up of Judas' robe, and from here rise upwards through the arch of Judas' back as he stretches scornfully to bestow his betrayer's kiss. One's eyes are next drawn across the painting and ahead in time to Peter cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave. From here one's view is thrown to the right of the painting where the apostles, upon fearing the violence that Peter has initiated, are fleeing the scene. Finally we move back to the mob as they crowd in on Christ. In this manner Duccio's painting works by compressing three separate time dependant events within the one framework. Aesthetically these three moments are grouped in vague proximity corresponding to the three main trees mentioned above. Each individual event in this work, however, appears on its own to be almost static.

In comparison to the temporal progression of Duccio's painting, Giotto's *Kiss of Judas* does not move through time but instead vibrates in time. It is the expression of a moment in which all things that are shown therein are occurring therein. Nevertheless, Giotto loses none of the essential doctrine expressed in Peter's violent action. With startling accuracy and understanding Giotto captures the cutting of the ear with such immediacy to the moment that there has not even been time for blood to flow. In fact the intent of the slave remains fixed on the central event of Christ and Judas, unaware of the wound he has been dealt. This capturing of the "now" moment enforces the personal nature of Giotto's painting relating it again back to the gospel of St. Luke, the gospel that highlights Christ's compassion by showing him heal the slave's ear.

Giotto's depiction of Peter, his raised arm in relation to the position of his head, appears to indicate his body to be half turned, maybe in the act of fleeing. If so this could prefigure Peter's denial of Christ, more to the point, it alludes to the abandonment by the apostles. By not showing the apostles in full—to the very left of the painting we see merely the glimmer of another halo—Giotto throws attention to the solitude of Christ at this moment, and in the coming hours to his death. Duccio removes Peter's halo, a reflection on his act, but Giotto paints Peter with a halo, suggesting a deeper understanding of God's Will, and the necessity of "all that must be so."



Duccio's painting with its explicit symbolism, use of ternaries, construction of time, condemnation of Peter, and detached portrayal of Christ is undoubtedly a work of some genius. However, in the end these symbolic artifices can detract from the power of this moment in its personal and human nature. It is this humanity that is the truth and the beauty of Giotto's work.

This brings us to the pivotal point of our considerations and certainly the keystone of Giotto's painting: the silent, eternal moment between Jesus and Judas, into which we are drawn. If Giotto's painting is to be seen as alive and buzzing, then surely this shared gaze exists in almost surreal stillness and quiet. It is the epicentre around which the noise of the arrest rages. Christ may be the centre of attention in Duccio's work, but this is a linear centring, set on the horizontal plane. In Giotto's masterpiece Jesus and Judas meet in a centre, around which the enclosing crowd—and, by extension, the whole world—rush like a whirlpool. Spatially this impression is given particularly through two characters: the Pharisee, arm raised in accusation, on the right of the painting, and the strange “dwarf-like” character cloaked in blue on the left. Both of these are positioned in the space between Christ and the viewer, which has the effect of throwing Christ deeper into the mob. At the same time the viewer becomes the final enclosing link in the enclosing wall around Christ. To realise this sense of participation is to understand one's own guilt, to be reminded that Christ died “for all mankind.”

The whirlpool surrounding Christ begins at the Pharisee then moves backwards into the crowd, swings away behind Christ, through the mass of dark soldiers helmets, momentum rising as it rushes towards the centre. It crashes into Peter, his arm and blade frozen in time—but far from cold—and then into the blue of the faceless “dwarf.” Here all time and space folds with the creases of his cloak. That this character has no face concentrates the viewer on this cloak. This then leads us into Judas. Not to his face, but into the truly amazing genius of his gown. Judas' robe envelops Christ, partaking of the implosion into the centre. The effect of this golden swathe surrounding the characters of Christ and Judas is simultaneously that of the whirlpool, and also as that of a shield through which this rush of time and space may not enter.

The importance of this cloak is paramount and fittingly it is in the painting of these two cloaks that Giotto demonstrates the most astounding sense of reality. The fall of the material in the “dwarf’s” blue cloak is captured with such brilliance that one may almost see the rising of his shoulders with each breath, and feel the sway of the drapery, as he pulls back on one of the fleeing apostles. The way in which Judas wraps his robe around Christ pulls the material tight against his back, so that the shape of his body is evident, hidden, but thus revealed, beneath this veneer of gold. This is highlighted by the play of light across his back, coming from the fire of the torches. The mechanics of Judas’ cloak draw one’s eyes along its folds, up into the gaze of Jesus upon Judas’ face; and it is here that the final momentous impact of Giotto’s painting lies.



The face of Duccio’s Judas exhibits a greater sense of malevolence than that of Giotto’s Judas. As envisaged by Duccio, Judas is cursed with hooked nose, pointy ear, and goatee beard, attributes by then traditionally associated with Luciferin folklore. His eyes peek from under heavy eyebrows, while the curl of the lips and the line of his cheek, suggest a sneer, as he advances on Christ. This is the face of “evil Judas” as opposed to what might be called “fated Judas,” or still better, “ignorant Judas.” This is not the face of a man who would then hang himself when he realises he has sinned. However, Giotto portrays Judas thick browed, eyes deep set and dark, almost Neolithic. He comes at Christ not tentatively like Duccio’s betrayer, who knows what it is he does, but open armed, in blind stupidity of the enormity of his

deed. This is a far more “Christian” portrayal, for in this depiction Judas is given to our sympathy, compassion, and forgiveness.

Highlighting this sense of compassion and humanity, Giotto’s Christ is viewed side on, meeting Judas face to face. Establishing the primacy of the moment between Christ and Judas, this placement also helps the dynamics of the painting. It pushes the crowd in on Christ while creating the flow of his movement, from left to right, and into the on-rushing climax. The image of Christ’s face is further highlighted by the mass of dark helmets crowding behind him. This darkness recalls the “hour of the power of darkness” in which Christ was betrayed. Again this darkness prefigures the darkness that is to descend over the earth in the sixth hour after the crucifixion. This time, when the “power of darkness rules,” is not simply the night but also the Day of Judgment that shall be a terrifying day of darkness (Amos 5:18). In this connection we should note the figure blowing the horn to the right of the painting, for the Day of Judgment is to be heralded by Elijah’s blowing of the great *shofar* (horn). It is also interesting to remark on the similarity of this face with its pursed lips at the horn with the face of Judas, his lips pursed for his kiss. It is Judas’ kiss that heralds the crucifixion, and hence resurrection, of Christ.

It is a carefully constructed paradox, that Giotto’s painting carries more sense of the mob (than does Duccio’s), is more noisy, more aggressive, it rushes forward, crashes against the centre, it is alive with sound, smell, and vibration, and yet, at the heart of the scene, in Christ’s look upon Judas, there is timelessness, stillness, and silence. One’s heart cannot help drown in the all-encompassing compassion of Christ, nor can it help aching with a sense of betrayal and sadness. While contemplating this painting one cannot but help feel that if Giotto’s Christ were to blink his eyes, then the whole world would go dark. Duccio’s painting carries with it many rewards both intellectually and artistically. Giotto’s *Kiss of Judas* echoes with a strange, haunting passion that is none other than the humanity of Jesus Christ.