

THREE THIEVES: A TRIPTYCH

MARK BARRON, O.P.

NOTE: Derived from the Greek, *triptychos*, meaning "folded thrice," the word *triptych* is of the vocabulary of Ecclesiastical Art wherein it signifies an altar-piece. Composed of a large central and two smaller wings, each with its own distinct subject carved in marble or painted upon wood, the whole is joined together by hinges.

The following represents an attempt to carry over into another medium—that of language—an idea and a message which the Medieval or Renaissance craftsman might have expressed in a triptych of marble or wood.

LEFT WING

Then went one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, to the chief priests.¹

Scene: Jerusalem—A room in the temple.

A dull green lamp, suspended from the ceiling, casts a fearful light over the assembly. Pharisees and chief priests strain forward in their seats. The eyes of all are fastened upon the strange figure in their midst.

JUDAS (*pointing off into the distance*). What will you give me and I will deliver Him unto you?²

A whispered murmuring, as of a group of bargaining merchants, arises. Judas alone is visibly agitated, given ever once more to fearful doubts.

A price is agreed upon. One of the assembly arises, money pouch in hand, and advances to the traitor. Judas, his eyes alight once more, extends his hand greedily. Opening the pouch, he counts—thirty pieces of silver, the price of his Master. Upon the faces of some in the group there fairly glows a smile of contempt and malevolence. Others appear to doubt the sincerity, or lack of sincerity, of this member of the chosen band.

¹ Matt., xxvi, 14.

² Matt., xxvi, 15.

And from thenceforth he sought opportunity to betray Him.³

CENTER WING

Scene: Golgotha.

It is "almost the sixth hour;" there is "darkness over all the earth."⁴ The only light is that which is cast by the torches and fires of the soldiery. Three crosses, bearing aloft their suffering burdens, are visible. There is a crowd, too, most of which is composed of those who have come to mock and jeer. Of their number is the thief who hangs upon the left of Christ.

BAD THIEF (*jeeringly*). If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us.⁵

GOOD THIEF (*rebukingly*). Neither dost thou fear God, seeing thou art under the same condemnation. (*mildly*) And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done no evil. (*Turns to Jesus . . . beseechingly.*) Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom.⁶

CHRIST (*turning to the good thief*). Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise.⁷

Was ever mortal penance brief
As mine? A moment of belief—
Turnkey of Heaven, beware—a thief!⁸

RIGHT WING

Then Judas, who betrayed Him, seeing that He was condemned, repenting himself, brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and ancients.⁹

Scene: Jerusalem—A room in the temple.

Judas again stands in the midst of the Jewish doctors. He presents a still more pitiful sight. The full realization of the awfulness of his crime has seized upon his consciousness. He has sought out the

³ Matt., xxvi, 16.

⁴ Luke, xxiii, 44.

⁵ Luke, xxiii, 39.

⁶ Luke, xxiii, 40-42.

⁷ Luke, xxiii, 43.

⁸ From "The Good Thief" by Rev. John Bannister Tabb in *The Poetry of Father Tabb*, edited by F. A. Litz (New York, 1928), p. 215.

⁹ Matt., xxvii, 3.

enemy once more, this time in the desperate hope that somehow he might undo his frightful deed.

JUDAS (*trembling and glancing from one to the other of the group*).
I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.¹⁰

There is a pause during which the assembled doctors manifest an impatience to be rid of the traitor.

CHIEF PRIEST (*stroking his beard and smiling acidly*). What is that to us? Look thou to it.¹¹

As if stunned by this response Judas straightens himself, looks upon the seated figures with a kind of stupidity. With an exclamation of horror and despair he hurls the thirty pieces of silver to the ground and rushes out.

. . . And went and hanged himself with a halter.¹²

¹⁰ Matt., xxvii, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Matt., xxvii, 5.

IN THE CARPENTER SHOP

PHILIP HYLAND, O.P.

Saint Joseph watches, wondering
Why Mary's face should pale
To see two small hands blundering
With wood . . . and nail.