

The Times They Are a-Changin', the third studio album by Bob Dylan, was released in 1964. The third track on side one is a song called "With God on Our Side". The penultimate verse goes like this:

*Through many a dark hour / I've been thinking about this; / that Jesus Christ was / betrayed
by a kiss. / But I can't think for you; / you'll have to decide / whether Judas Iscariot / had
God on his side.*

That's quite a statement, which touches on an age-old conundrum about human free will and determinism. There are all sorts of ways of having a determinist outlook, but in essence it's the idea that events are determined by pre-existing circumstances, which, taken to its logical conclusion, means that human beings aren't responsible for the choices they make. It makes a Christian-determinist view of Judas Iscariot problematic. Could he have chosen *not* to betray Jesus, and what would the salvation story look like if he had taken that path?

Today's short reading from Matthew 21 tells of Jesus' triumphant ride into Jerusalem. For Matthew, the early part of the text is almost as important as the actual entrance into the city. Jesus tells two of his disciples to bring him a donkey and a colt, adding: "If anyone says anything to you, just say... 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."

Matthew continues: "This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet" and quotes from the Old Testament. This is in fact an amalgamation of a verse from Isaiah, combined with a verse from Zechariah 9: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

All four Gospels tell the story of the disciples being commanded to fetch the donkey. While John's account refers back to the Old Testament, it's Matthew who really lays it on thick, even implying that the animals' owner is playing a part in fulfilling ancient prophecy. Indeed, throughout his Gospel, Matthew goes to great lengths to refer back to the Jewish scriptures, trying to demonstrate that Jesus was the promised and longed-for Messiah.

A determinist interpretation of this story would view the disciples, the owner, the animals, and even Jesus, as fulfilling prophecy rather than exercising free will. It's fair to say that Matthew's aim was to set Jesus firmly within the Jewish story, looking at what had gone before and making connections. Nevertheless, there are shades of determinism in this reading, which may be at odds with our modern sensibilities, living as we do in a time when we value personal freedom so highly. Were those who played such key roles in such an important story simply acting out a pre-determined script? And what are we to take away from this?

On the one hand, we don't need to accept everything we read in scripture unconditionally, agreeing with every word. On the other hand, if we simply gloss over difficult teachings we risk losing something. So we need to be thoughtful and prayerful about everything we read, turning it over in our hearts and minds, seeking God's guidance and talking to each other honestly. What can we learn from the scriptures and how can it inform our faith and behaviour?

Generations of scholars have puzzled over the conundrum of free will and determinism and, in fact, we'll never be able to decide, as Bob Dylan sings, "whether Judas Iscariot / had God on his side". But we do, and we should, behave as people who *do* have choice, able to take full responsibility for our actions. So, as we move deeper into Holy Week, let us thank God for the wonderful mysteries of Matthew's Gospel, and commit ourselves to demonstrating God's love, grace and mercy to those around us.