
Sunday 16th May – Seventh Sunday of Easter
Readings: Acts 1:15-17, 21-end & John 17:6-19

Acts 1:15-17,21-end

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, 'Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.'

So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.' Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

John 17:6-19

Jesus prays for his disciples

'I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are

one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

‘I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.’

Reflection

Whenever we read the Gospels, we need to remember that each author is selective in what they record! In that sense, none of the Gospels is “complete!” John’s Gospel 21:25: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written!” This could be dismissed as hyperbole, but actually John was being prophetic! For Jesus’ work definitely didn’t stop with his death, resurrection and ascension – Jesus’ work continued through his disciples and now continues through us! And will continue long after us! If every follower of Jesus, from the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry up until now, had written a book about what Jesus had done in their lives, that would be an awful lot of books!

Working on the basis that the writers of Luke/Acts and John’s gospel were recording the things they prayerfully considered to be the most important, the verses that stood out for me from today’s readings were Acts 1:16: “The Scripture had to be fulfilled...concerning Judas” and John 17:12: “None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction, so that Scripture would be fulfilled.” Why did they choose these verses? Here’s the thing. When life is running smoothly and things appear to be going well, it’s easy for us to believe that God has a plan – and not just any plan, but a good plan. But when life gets messy and painful, suddenly we’re no longer quite so certain. We feel let down when our dreams are dashed. It’s harder to trust that God is in control. Doubts begin to set in. This must have been the experience of the disciples when they

saw Jesus arrested and crucified. How could God let this happen? And if God let this happen to Jesus, what about them? It must have felt as if the proverbial rug had been pulled from under their feet. Where did their security lie now?

What we see in the resurrection narratives is that Jesus knew his disciples were fearful and unsettled. He constantly reassures them that all is well. It really is him – he is alive – moreover, all the events surrounding his death did not happen by accident. They were foretold in Scripture and had always been known to God. Now maybe the disciples felt guilty that they hadn't realised what Judas had been about to do. Maybe they wondered if things would have turned out differently if they had been able to stop him? Jesus makes it clear there never was a plan B. His death was unavoidable. It had to happen in the way, and at the time, that it did.

Now to be honest, I've always struggled a little with the idea of Judas being "doomed to destruction". It suggests Judas didn't have a choice over what he did. As if he was "locked in" to the actions he took... That someone had to be the bad guy, and this was always going to be Judas' destiny! That may have been the case later on, but it didn't begin that way. Judas was chosen by Jesus the same as all the other disciples! He had the same choices they did! He was given the same opportunities to learn from Jesus and to share in his ministry! Matthew 10:1: "Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and illness." Jesus could have said, "I won't give Judas this power and authority because he's going to betray me." Instead, Jesus treated Judas exactly the same as all the others. He was never left out when the disciples went out on mission.

So how did Judas go wrong? The gospels reveal that Judas was avaricious. Greedy for money. John 12 tells the story of Mary, who anointed Jesus with half a litre of expensive perfume. Judas objected. "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." John continues, "He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it." Not only was Judas a thief, he was also a liar. He was the master of smooth words and dirty tricks. He said one thing but meant the opposite. But Jesus wasn't fooled; he knew Judas was about to betray him. Notice how money was involved, Matthew 26:14: "Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and asked, 'What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?' So they

counted out for him thirty pieces of silver.” From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.”

The disciples never questioned Judas’ frequent disappearances. They assumed he was just doing another errand for Jesus. Little did they know he was arranging to betray his Master. While they were celebrating the Passover, Jesus spoke openly. Matthew 26:20: “Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me!” The disciples were stunned. Some of them asked Jesus if he was talking about them. Judas even had the gall to ask the same question! “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” Once again Judas used smooth words to disguise his true feelings, calling Jesus, “Teacher”, a name that implies respect, when a few hours later he would betray Jesus with a cruel kiss. “You have said so” replied Jesus, who knew the truth behind Judas’ words.

After Jesus was condemned, Judas realised the enormity of what he had done. He went back to the Chief Priests and Elders; Matthew 27:4: “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood!” Maybe Judas hoped to absolve himself of responsibility and remove his guilt, by returning the money. But only God can take away our sin and heal us! Moreover, there is a very real difference between remorse and repentance! After Peter denied Jesus, he was overcome with shame and wept bitterly. He was truly sorry for what he had done and received forgiveness. How different with Judas. He knew he had done wrong, but he didn’t weep, he didn’t say sorry. He could have found the eleven and begged for help; he could have cried out to God for mercy. Instead, Judas chose the path of despair and death. No one forced Judas to end it that way. Sadly, his choices destroyed him. And thus the words of the Psalmists and the prophets were fulfilled.

What can we learn from Judas’ story? 1) Beware of secret desires and secret sins! These are the ones that have real power to entangle us! 2) We’re weaker when we’re on our own. So, seek out Christian friends with whom you can pray, to whom you can be accountable. 3) When things go wrong, be reconciled with God as soon as possible. 4) Above all remember that we have a mighty Saviour in Jesus; I am confident that just as Jesus prayed that God would protect the remaining disciples, Jesus is praying protection over us right now. Now that’s a promise to claim and to hold onto! Amen

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