Sermon for 7th of Easter Year B

Readings: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

i

Exactly who Matthias was and what he did is now lost in the confusion of history. Some identify him with Nathanael, others with Zacchaeus and others with Barnabas. There is strong evidence he was active in southern Russia in the Armenia, Georgia region, but we have several versions about how and where he died. The real mystery, however, is why he was appointed at all.

In the following years, Peter, Paul and other apostles would die, but they were not replaced to maintain a ruling council of 12 apostles to run the Church, so why replace Judas with Matthias at this stage?

The answer seems to be that they wanted to launch the Church with the symbolically important number of 12 apostles to represent the 12 tribes of Israel, to show that they saw themselves as the New Israel, the New People of God and the true heirs, by faith, of Abraham.

The essential qualification for being eligible to replace Judas is enlightening. The person had to be a man in that cultural setting, a fact that was so self-evident to the gospel writers at that time it doesn’t merit a mention. The man had to have been a witness to the whole Jesus story which starts with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan and ends with the ascension, but the one absolutely crucial element stipulated is that the man must have been a witness to the resurrection. Whatever other event he may have missed over the duration of the ministry of Jesus, the resurrection was non-negotiable.

Being a witness to all these events is the crucial factor of apostleship, not family blood ties. In Acts 1:14 we are told that the believers were gathered together, the apostles are named and then Luke adds that Mary, the mother of Jesus was present along with Jesus’ ‘brothers’.

This suggests that Mary already had a respected position within the Jerusalem church and is typical of Luke’s interest in the role of women throughout his gospel account and what follows in *Acts of the Apostles.* Jesus’ brothers, however, are not named. Leaving aside the argument about whether Jesus’ brothers were half –brothers Joseph had with a previously deceased wife or whether they were full blood brothers, it is worth noting that there is no automatic blood dynasty being created. This is despite the fact that one of those brothers, James, later became one of the early leaders of the Jerusalem church whom we meet later in Luke’s account (Acts 15:12). The point is that their hostility to Jesus we see in Mark 3:31 has been replaced by faith. Perhaps the crucifixion and resurrection account for this change of heart.

Since Jesus’ brothers had been initially sceptical of Jesus’ mission, they were not eligible to be made apostles because they had not witnessed so much of what Jesus had said and done.

However, when Peter addresses the assembled believers in verse 16, the term ‘brothers’ is being used in the sense of all the assembled believers. The new family of the Church now takes precedence over traditional family blood ties. That was a revolutionary notion to that society. It still shocks many today, but when Jesus said, ‘By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another,’ Jesus was clearly expecting the bonds between Christians to be strong, meaningful and visible – with the power to convert the non-believer.

If that doesn’t make you squirm when you think of the weak and often dysfunctional relationships Christians often display to one another within their own church and across denominations, then it’s probably time to take off your rose-coloured spectacles.

ii

Matthias and his fellow apostles are long since dead and gone, although we trust that they continue in heaven to pray for us and to encourage us. But in the absence of those living witnesses who accompanied Jesus, how do we now find reliable witnesses to guide us today?

Whilst Protestants would immediately think of the Bible, the written apostolic witness as our fundamental guide, and Catholics would instinctively think of the Church as our guarantor of apostolic faith, the passage from 1 John 5:9-13 speaks of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. John says we have man’s testimony, and by that he could mean the testimony that God has given to his Son through the OT prophets, and in the apostolic witness to Christ, principally to the resurrection, but now there is the inward testimony of the heart through the Holy Spirit.

John seems to identify a series of steps towards this inward assurance of the Holy Spirit. He says that people first hear, then they believe, then they receive new life, and then ultimately they know that they have received eternal life by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. This could be the force of what we read in the gospels when Jesus says, ‘everyone who has will be given more’ (Matthew 25:29, Luke 19:26).

John is also arguing that there is an indissoluble unity between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. You cannot have Christ without also having God, but equally you cannot truly have God without also having the Son and therefore to believe in Jesus is to have eternal life which is conferred and confirmed by the Spirit.

iii

The theme of bearing witness continues in our gospel reading also. In John 17:6-19 Jesus claims as he has borne a faithful witness to the Father and now he prays for those who have responded so that the witness they will give after he has left them may continue to flourish and remain true.

Jesus says that those who have responded to him have ‘known with certainty’ that the Father has sent him. Such has been the Father’s show of support for Jesus which is how John interprets the miracles, or ‘signs’ as he calls them.

The believers of Jesus have now been called to no longer belong to the world, in the same way as Jesus did not belong to the world. Christians are called to belong to a new kingdom, a spiritual kingdom and how they witness to this reality to the world is to live in unity (v11), joy (v13), and truth (v17).

The result of receiving such gifts will be that the believers will be ‘truly sanctified’. In other words, Christians will best witness to the world that the gospel is true by living holy lives. This is Wesley’s core message. We are not giving a true, faithful witness of the Christ we proclaim unless we are experiencing the new life of the Spirit. We have been changed; we are in the process of changing from one degree of glory to another, as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3:18.

Faithful witness, or ‘holy living’ proceeds from the New Birth of the individual believer’s heart, according to Wesley. Without rebirth through the Holy Spirit, famously depicted in Wesley’s own ‘warmed heart’ experience, there is no new life to bear witness to the truth of the gospel.

Some commentators see an illustration of this point in the election of Matthias through the traditional drawing of lots. The OT tradition was to write the names of candidates on pebbles, put them in a container and shake it until one stone fell out.

This action was taken after the ascension and before Pentecost. There is no mention of choosing Matthias with the help of the Holy Spirit. Luke appears to wish to make a stark contrast between how the Church works before and after Pentecost. After Pentecost the Holy Spirit guides such choices.

In Acts 8:26 the ‘angel of the Lord’ directs Philip to meet the Ethiopian on the desert road and the Holy Spirit suddenly took Philip away (Acts 8:39). In Acts 13:2 we read: ‘The Holy Spirit said, “Set aside for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”’

The contrast between these later instances and the story of Matthias is intentional. In Acts 1:21- 26 the apostles were still genuine apostles; they were still witnesses to the ministry of Jesus and supremely to the resurrection, but until they received the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 they were no more capable than their forebears had been. It is life in the Spirit that makes authentic Christian life possible.

Belonging to the right group or church (as the apostles certainly did in Acts 1), believing the right things (as the apostles certainly did in Acts 1), is not enough; authentic Christian life is only possible when the Spirit comes. This is why Wesley looked for ‘scriptural holiness’ wherever he found it as being the true mark of the New Birth.

How well would our church here today measure up by that standard in the eyes of the apostles, Wesley or above all, Jesus Christ? If our church is ineffectual, perhaps we have heard today a possible explanation.

One of Wesley’s great fears was that Methodism would one day have all the form of Church, but none of the power.

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