

## Easter 7      Acts 1:15-17; 21-26

I wonder how many Dr Who fans we have here? Or Star Trek, as that sometimes included ideas of time travel as well.

Sometimes the Church of England Sunday reading can make us feel like we've travelled through time. Just as we were working our way through the Book of Acts, we're suddenly plunged back to chapter 1. There's a reason for that – next week we have the story of Pentecost, and this is just before that event. I just wonder why we have to have the other readings from Acts in the previous weeks.

We are back at the start of the book, with the disciples gathering in secret before the coming of the Spirit. It's interesting that they were by now 120 in number, which suggests that the resurrection appearances had indeed been to more than just a handful, or at least were starting to be believed.

Peter is already emerging as a leader in the safety of this meeting, and he speaks up. First of all he says that David predicted Judas' betrayal and suicide. The lectionary omits a little insert from Luke who wrote Acts giving the gory account of Judas taking his life, along with Peter quoting two verses from Psalms. The first refers back to Judas; the second: 'Let another take his position of overseer.' comes from Psalm 109:8

However, the reason for needing a replacement for Judas isn't just due to a rather tenuous connection with a verse from Psalms; Peter feels that the ministry needs to be shared between 12 – the number Jesus had called. The qualification for this was that they came from what must have been a wider group of followers who had seen and heard the bulk of Jesus' ministry – from the baptism of John to the resurrection.

That is an interesting piece of information. The gospels often refer to groups gathering around Jesus, and also imply that some women were regularly attached to the group. They don't state that there were other men who followed Jesus everywhere who were not one of the 12. Here Luke makes it clear that there were at least two extras: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias, and possibly more who didn't get nominated.

Note that having a woman wasn't contemplated. We might view that as sexist today, but in the culture of the time a woman's testimony had no legal standing, and the prevailing culture would have made it very difficult for her to make a contribution – even if she could get the freedom from her family to travel.

The selection method is fascinating – they prayed and drew lots. That echoes something we see occasionally in the Old Testament where they had something called the Urim and Thummim which were holy lots that could be drawn (e.g. 1 Sam 14:36-46). Imagine choosing vicars that way today!

The lot fell to Matthias, and he was added to the 11 to restore them to 12, symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel, of course. A later church historian, Eusebius, suggested that he was one of the seventy who were sent out by Jesus. It is certainly plausible, as clearly to be an apostle you had to be close to that inner circle who had seen and heard so much of Jesus' ministry.

Perhaps the irony of this story is that Matthias then pretty much disappears from history. He has been mixed up with Matthew – the author of the gospel – and also other characters, but in fact we know nothing more with any clarity. One late account suggests he went to Ethiopia. Some have even suggested that the early church was hasty – even suggesting that they should have waited for Paul's conversion, although his knowledge and experience of Jesus was very different.

So what do we gain from this text? What can we learn?

First of all, there is a desire to put things right. Losing Judas in the way that they did must have been traumatic. Let down and betrayed by a member of that close circle must have been devastating, never mind the consequences of his actions. And just as they were coming to terms with that, his suicide makes it all the more difficult to deal with. Matthias in that sense brought some healing to the group. They gained a

sense that God was with them, guiding them and putting things back in a new and perhaps unexpected way.

I think we can find that in life. We all sustain losses in different ways – material, friendships and relationships, people moving on, bereavements. And healing of those wounds sometimes needs something new, unexpected and God sent in order to bring some restoration. A new job, a new start, a new hobby, a new group of friends, and yes – a new appreciation of what our faith means. They're not a straight replacement, but I think God sometimes surprises us with what can make a difference.

Secondly, we have to assume that Matthias was quite a humble person. He got the nomination, and what could have been a high profile elevation to apostle, but he just quietly gets on with whatever he got on with. We don't know where he went, when he died, or what he achieved. I find it quite reassuring that at least one of the apostles didn't become a big star, but had a ministry that may or may not have been unremarkable, but at the very least never registered with historians or the authors of the New Testament.

I wonder if you feel that your contribution to the life of the church is unremarkable. That history won't record what you did. I think all of us might be surprised at the differences we have made that we are completely unaware of. Emma is a curate over in Blackpool, and she was a student at St Martin's. She's great fun, and we always knew that she might be ministry bound – but she didn't. It was only recently that she spoke about something I can't even remember saying to her that made a huge difference. She had turned up at the chaplaincy centre, made a cuppa as students often did and then blurted out about ordination. Apparently I was completely unperturbed and said something like "Oh you've worked it out at last". Seemingly this made all the difference.

Third that God guides in some pretty unexpected ways. I don't recommend drawing lots, dipping your finger into a Bible for a random verse or anything else like that. However, people find guidance in so many surprising circumstances. There was a well known theologian and monk called Roland Walls. He set up a little community at Roslin near Edinburgh, and became legendary for his spiritual direction and guidance. Earlier in his life when he was still enjoying a successful academic career he saw a train of old wagons go through the station – probably on their way to be scrapped. On the side they had "return empty to Edinburgh". He knew that was for him, and he and in due course adopted a very simple life in a very basic religious community – the Community of the Transfiguration. I once went there with Debbie – and it was a simple life they had.

Matthias may not have been the headline member of the line-up of the apostles, like Peter, but perhaps he is more of an encouragement than he first seems. Later on, when Luke was writing Acts, he clearly felt it was important to record him, perhaps to ensure that someone who never did anything spectacular was remembered as a faithful servant, which is what God looks for in all of us,

Amen.