

## **Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney**

**The Reverend Andrew Sempell**

*Rector of St James*

### **Choral Evensong on Saint Matthias' Day**

**24 February 2019**

**Readings:** 1 Samuel 1: 21-28; 1 Corinthians 4: 1-13.

#### ***"A Crisis in Leadership"***

#### **The Enigma of Judas**

As I recently wrote in my article for Parish Connections, there is a good deal of ambiguity surrounding the apostle Judas Iscariot. He was close to Jesus, respected by the apostles as their treasurer, but he betrayed them. Yet it is this betrayal that gives rise to the crucifixion and resurrection, and therefore the means of salvation.

Judas played an important part in salvation history, for in betraying Jesus' location to the authorities they were able to arrest him and further the journey to the cross. Moreover, through this action, God was able to demonstrate the power of love over fear and hatred and thereby redeem even an act of betrayal.

Questions remain over Judas motivations and of his salvation. A simple reading of the Bible suggests that he was motivated by money. Yet, there is also the implication that he might have been a member of a Jewish revolutionary group and, because of this, sought to force Jesus' hand into causing a revolt. Nevertheless, we don't know the answer to these speculations.

There is also the question as to whether God (or Jesus) set Judas up for this act of betrayal. Jesus seemed to know what Judas was about to do and didn't seek to prevent it. I wonder what Judas understood of the situation?

Finally, it would seem that Judas was filled with guilt and remorse. Perhaps it was because events did not turn out to be the way he expected. Perhaps, like all of the apostles, he didn't understand enough about God's purposes.

Judas therefore remains a bit of an enigma:

- He was one of the inner-circle of Jesus' followers,
- He was a trusted and senior member of the group,
- Jesus knew what he was about to do and didn't try to stop him, and
- He was remorseful for his actions and committed suicide as a result.

## Matthias the Unknown

After the resurrection accounts in the Gospel of Luke the story then moved on to the early church - exit Judas and enter Matthias. When compared with Judas Iscariot, there is little information to be had regarding his replacement, the disciple Matthias. The only reference to him is in the Acts of the Apostles, where we read the description of his selection.

Chronologically, it happened after the Ascension of Jesus and before Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The followers of Jesus had gathered in Jerusalem to work out what they should do next. First item on the agenda was to replace Judas as one of the twelve. It is described as follows;

*Peter addressed the gathering and said: "Let another take his [Judas'] position of overseer. So, one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (Acts 1: 16-26)*

It was an unpretentious selection method, for the idea of the people of God speaking through the guidance of the Holy Spirit had not yet emerged. It was simply a matter of identifying a list of suitable candidates and letting God decide by choosing lots - similar to drawing straws. In this way Matthias was appointed apostle and was then never heard of again, except in the legendary writings of the second century church.

As an aside, I would dearly love to see the Biblical approach of drawing lots applied to the process of selecting bishops today. Instead, we seem to have a 'war of attrition' that has become the guiding principle for modern electoral synods – a process that too often brings disgrace upon the moral standing of the church! But I digress.

All of this mystery about Matthias causes me to ask what is actually going on in this reading from Acts 1; for I suspect that it is neither about Judas nor Matthias.

## A Church is Born

The book of the Acts of the Apostles was written by the same author of the Gospel of Luke in around 80AD (well over 40 years after the crucifixion). It is an account of the development of the early church under the apostles, and especially describes the challenges that the churches around Asia Minor faced. As such, it is probably more a work of theology than history.

Four things are emphasised in it:

1. The importance of Jerusalem as the place of origin of the church,
2. The special role of the ‘twelve’ apostles in leading and shaping the church,
3. The missionary work of St Paul as apostle to the gentiles, and
4. The presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the leadership and guidance of the church.

The filling of the vacant place in the group of twelve apostles is the first thing that the church does. It demonstrates a desire for good order and authority within the church. Indeed, it suggests the beginning of ordination as a requirement for the exercise of ministry. The emphasis is on the business of filling a vacancy rather than on the people involved. It might well have occurred if any one of the apostles had died in less tragic circumstances to that of Judas.

What is important here are verses 21 and 22:

*“So, one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.”*

(Acts 1: 21-22)

In this way, the writer lays down the qualifications for apostleship and, by extension, leadership in the early church. Moreover, the Greek word used in the text for ‘overseer’ is, unsurprisingly, *επισκοπην*, which is also the word used for ‘bishop’ in the church. This again reinforces that the story is about the creation of authority and order in the early church. Matthias is more a ‘footnote’ than a ‘chapter’ in the story of apostleship and its connection with church order and discipline.

## **Servant Leadership**

The issue of apostleship is also central to tonight’s reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Here St Paul is busy outlining the role and qualities of apostles in the church. *“Think of us in this way”*, he writes, *“as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries”*.

St Paul’s position is that the ministry of ‘oversight’ is, in fact, one of service rather than the exercise of power. This is a basic New Testament principle; similar to this morning’s Gospel reading from Luke, where Jesus said:

*“I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; ...”*

(Luke 6: 27-28)

One of the popular misunderstandings concerning the concept of ‘servant leadership’ is the expectation that leaders should be servile and accommodating of everyone’s expectations. On the contrary, the sign of a good servant is to be seen in their capacity to discern and anticipate what is going to happen next, as well as their being focussed on the task in hand. It is as the Housekeeper in *Downton Abbey* says, “I am a good servant because I know what they want before they even know it themselves.” Servant leadership is therefore a matter of harnessing awareness, discernment, vision and discipline for the benefit of others.

It is also an issue of personal motivation; for while a worthy servant will be driven by a desire for the general good, and is therefore focussed on the needs of others, a bad servant will be concerned with self-promotion and self-protection; and is therefore usually motivated by a desire for power and status. A bad servant is therefore often a bully, a manipulator, and possibly a narcissist.

So, what of the church? The Christian faith is focussed on both the physical world that we inhabit as well as the spiritual world that we call the Kingdom of God. The church exists between and within them both, encouraging a process of transformation both individually and corporately which we call mission. In all of this, we seek to proclaim the good news of Christ, nurture the faithful, serve the needy, seek justice, and preserve the integrity of creation – a mighty big task and one that needs both effective leadership and willing followership all round.

Yet there is more; for we as the church, in all our diversity, divisions and brokenness, are called to be Christ to the world. In this way Jesus, as head of the church, leads us and is present to the world through us. Church leaders are not called to be commanders of troops, or feudal over-lords, or school-masters, or politicians, or even CEOs. No, a servant-leader is meant to be an icon of Christ – who came to serve rather than be served; and so, it is to be with us!