

Seventh Sunday of Easter Year B

This is the final Sunday in the Easter Season. Pentecost, which we celebrate next week, marks a further transition, from the life of the Fellowship of the Risen Christ to the Fellowship of the Spirit.

Acts 1:15-17, 21-16

Peter takes the chair at the first 'official' gathering of Jesus' followers after the Resurrection. There is one item on the Agenda: to appoint a replacement for Judas.

Peter begins by summarising the position. Judas had been 'one of us', and yet had betrayed Jesus. It is time to complete the number of the Apostles by electing – under the Holy Spirit's guidance – someone to take his place. Peter then sets out the eligibility criteria for prospective candidates. Intriguingly, the main criterion is that the candidate must have been with Jesus from the beginning. This is intriguing because the remaining eleven (and Judas himself) had met this condition, but had failed miserably (and in Peter's case ignominiously, and in Judas' case disgracefully) to show ultimate loyalty to Jesus. So what kind of a condition is this, one wonders?

Two men were proposed. After prayer they voted, and chose Matthias. Thank you, Matthias, and good bye; for that is in truth the last we shall hear about the new Apostle. His name is never mentioned again!

As with so many incidents, this one is fascinating in the number of questions it throws up. Peter decided on the criteria for candidates. A candidate was chosen. And yet he has made no recorded impact on history apart from being elected.

Conclusion: the importance of this little story lies in the way it sets a precedent for decision-making in the Christian community. It involves scripture, a close relationship with Jesus, and seeking God's will through prayer.

And yet ...

Ps 1

This, the first of 150 psalms, is a kind of overture to the whole psalter. Its theme is simple and straightforward. Human blessedness lies in devotion to 'the Law of the Lord'. Those whose lives are not directed by this fundamental principle – they are 'like chaff' and 'their way shall perish'.

1 John 5:9-13

Towards the end of his letter, John the elder seems to become more direct, more concise, perhaps more urgent. If we are disposed to believe human testimony, John argues, why do we not give God's testimony equal credence?

By withholding our assent to God's testimony, we are, in effect, dismissing God's testimony as untrue: God is a liar.

And the testimony God provides is in two parts (verse 11). First is the gift of eternal life – that quality of life which can stand up to the sternest test of all: can life of this quality match up to eternity. And the second is that this life is embodied – made incarnate – in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Which, if you think about it, is exactly where the Gospel of John begins: 'in him was life and the life was the light of all people'.

John 17: 6-19

Chapter 17 of John's Gospel is sometimes referred to as 'the Priestly Prayer of Jesus', because in it Jesus begins his ministry of intercession for his followers – a ministry that will continued in heaven after his Ascension.

Like all John's writing it is complex, like a Rubik's cube. It is not easy to see how to twist things round so they make plain sense. But they do, and it is possible.

This prayer is focussed (verse 6) on the disciples (who at this precise moment are in the greatest danger; if they crumble and disperse, all is lost – think about it!). Jesus affirms that they have indeed received him and his teaching, and have kept God's word. He affirms that they are God's gift to him and that he has faithfully discharged his responsibilities, towards them and towards the Father.

Jesus asks for the Father's protection (verse 11) so that the hard-won unity of purpose may be sustained through times of great hardship. The Lord's petition continues with a clarification. Jesus is not asking that the disciples be removed from the place of danger, but that they be sustained and protected in it.

In other words, Jesus is asking the Father to embrace them in God's purpose and mission even as the Father embraced the Son in God's purpose and mission – through immense hardship.

John's Gospel is not a simple story. We cannot read it simply with a view to 'finding out how the story ends'. It is a collection of profound meditations on the nature and ministry of Jesus, which will nourish our faith and bring much blessing.