

Sunday 24th February, 2019

St Matthias - Year C

Acts 1:14-17,20-26

Psalm 113

Philippians 3:13-21

John 15:9-17

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

In many Dioceses around Australia certainly, and possibly elsewhere in the world, today's Feast is commonly used as a date for Ordinations to the Diaconate and the Priesthood. Indeed, I was reminded during the week that this was the case for this Diocese in years' past. I know of a number of my colleagues for whom this is their anniversary date, and I pray especially for them on this day. In some ways it's a practical thing - February is a common month to do ordinations; and Matthias is the first Feast Day of the year which marks the life of one of the early disciples.

But in reflecting more on today's readings, I wonder whether there is something else other than just coincidence or happenstance about this feast which really lends itself to the practice of ordaining people for ministry on it. And it has to do with the context for Matthias becoming one of the chosen disciples.

Let's look again at today's first reading. The faithful people come together and, as usual, for good or for bad, Peter is in charge. He stands up among the company of the 120 and explains the issue. Then he reaches back, quoting from the Psalms to justify forgetting Judas and leaving behind the memory of his unfaithfulness so that another might take his office.

Now comes the problem. Who wants to be the successor to Judas? Surely no one would ever live down the memory of such a predecessor. I cannot imagine that they had many volunteers. Peter outlines the qualifications required: a man who has been with us, from the beginning, through it all, from the baptism of John until the day of Jesus' ascension and someone who saw the risen Jesus (that drops the number of candidates).

It seems that from the short list, they came down to a shorter list. Two, to be exact. Neither of whom we know anything about. And then they prayed. Perhaps Joseph, called Barsabbas or Justus, and Matthias were praying that they would choose the other one... at least if they were smart.

Then comes the election. “You Lord know the hearts of all - you show us which one YOU have chosen to fill the open spot of minister and apostle from Judas who went his own way...” I’m not sure whether they stood there for a while waiting for God to show them, or whether their choice of casting lots was how they believed they would find the answer from the start - but this is what they do.

They cast lots. And short straw wins, I guess. And Matthias won, well that is not exactly what Scripture says: the lot fell on Matthias. Call that winning or losing? I am not sure which. But here’s the thing - and the link I see to Ordination. Matthias was chosen - people recognized him and his gifts. They nurtured him. And then perhaps they prodded him, encouraged him - said “you can do this” in his ear, when perhaps he did not believe it, or even recognize his gifts.

And that is a vital part of the process we now call discernment. There are multitudes of Christ’s followers around the world. Some of them have been given particular gifts - not special gifts, or better gifts than others; but particular gifts, to be recognized by the church as priests and deacons. But in many cases they need to be raised up; encouraged, prodded sometimes. And then we trust the Church to walk with this person in his or her journey of discernment. There are some who may not think that we have come very much further than casting lots to decide!! And I would be the first to admit that the church’s processes for discernment and formation are far from perfect.

But today of all days we are reminded of the importance of walking together as Christ’s followers, and of helping others to recognize and celebrate their own unique gifts.

So what of Matthias? Because this passage we had today is precisely the last thing we ever hear about Matthias. Ever. As soon as Matthias was chosen as an apostle, he fell back into obscurity. He experienced, we assume, with the others the fiery and joyful grace of Pentecost. And with the others he also suffered arrest and scourging by the Jewish leaders, and rejoiced that he “had been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus.”

He journeyed and preached and healed, but not a single word more was dedicated to him in Holy Scripture. (According to some Matthias preached the Gospel in Judaea, then in what is present day Georgia where a marker placed in the ruins of a Roman fortress claims that he is buried.)

He was simply one of the Twelve. And if all we have is a name-Matthias how do we remember him?

The unremarkable Matthias is remarkable only to God... In history a footnote... in the memory of the Church a mystery ... in the mission of the kingdom anonymous... in the list of the saints, a name... only to God remarkable at all.

I dare say I am the same. Sure, there are people who know my name while I am alive... and in years to come I hope my kids will remember me... and maybe even a grandchild or two... but then I will be done... the unremarkable Sam is remarkable only to God...

And you are the same. We are all these names with stories largely anonymous, known well to God and known hardly at all in history or the martyrology of the saints... we are the ordinary who are extraordinary only because of the riches of God's grace in Christ, the mercy of His love to forgive us, the desire of His heart to redeem us, the wisdom of His Spirit to call us, the miracle of His work to teach us faith, and the mission that is ours for one brief shining moment while we live and then it passes to others... as it did to Matthias...

We are all, by the grace of God what we have been created to be - me, Matthias... and you. And we exist in community, we thrive in communion with other Christians, and we are joined to them, as John describes in today's Gospel, like branches are joined to the vine.

All of Jesus' followers, all of us - and not only those chosen for special apostolic office, are united with him in a living bond, as the branches to the vine, drawing life and inspiration from him. The apostles, including Matthias, devoted themselves to propagating and nurturing that Vine, our great, collective belonging to Jesus the Risen Lord. And this is our call, too. May we, like Matthias and all the Saints, be faithful to our calling...

Amen