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And the WHAT fell on WHO?? (Acts 1.12-17, 20-26)

St Matthias, Apostle and Martyr

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In the Western church's calendar, February 24 is designated as the feast day of St Matthias who, as you've just heard, was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot as apostle after Judas died. Of course, not everyone will be celebrating St Matthias today. Some Christians are wary that placing emphasis on individual saints may lead to veneration and idolatry. Everything we need to live the Christian life comes from our union with Jesus, they say, besides, the bible refers to all believers as saints (e.g. Phil 1.1) why single out particular individuals for special acknowledgment? Yet, others believe we can learn from these (often colourful) figures, including from their mistakes; be inspired by their faith and dedication, encouraged by the ways they allowed Jesus by his Spirit to imbue their flesh, to 'tattoo God' on their 'makeshift lives' (to borrow an image from poet Ursula Fanthorpe¹). This, I assume, is why Luke chose to include the story of Matthias in his account of Jesus and the early church, and why the lectionary designates a day for remembering.

Having said that, there's not a whole lot we know about Matthias. Tradition has it that he preached the gospel in ports along the coast of the Caspian Sea, and that he was martyred in the year 80AD. Beyond that, all we have is this one intriguing account in Acts, a report that is itself a bit strange and unsettling. What can we learn from this story, what does it offer for our lives of discipleship, our way of choosing leaders and of being church? Let's take a closer look.

The story is set in the period after the risen Christ has departed and before the day of Pentecost. It commences with a little summary about the disciples returning to Jerusalem after the Ascension and devoting themselves to prayer. Eleven disciples are

¹ UA Fanthorpe, 'Getting it across', e.g. <https://www.stmarysbattersea.org.uk/article/from-the-vicar-2/>

named; one is absent, Judas Iscariot. Next, Luke homes in on an address given by Peter in which this missing disciple *is* named. He points out (using references to and quotes from scripture) that Judas needs to be replaced by another who will take a role as overseer. Peter is quite coy in his reference to Judas's betrayal, stating merely that he 'became a guide for those who arrested Jesus' (16). Perhaps that's because he's only too aware of how he himself had been compromised during his master's trial. Well, Peter may've been coy, but Luke spares none of the grisly detail:

Now this man (Judas) acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; [he writes] and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood. (18-19)

It's awful stuff, so confronting that the compilers of modern lectionaries, omit these verses when the text is set for public reading. You can see why, it could turn people off, but Luke includes it. Why?

Well, for mine, it's to remind us that for all our declarations, good intentions, giftedness and religious activity we followers of Christ are never immune from straying into falsity. When you contemplate what it means to be a disciple, Luke is saying, or a leader in the church, remember Judas. We can easily think of him as 'other', as a 'bad apple' and so different to us, but Judas wasn't that different - he '*was a good man, selected by Jesus himself*' (Garrett 2009.214). What happened? What took him from wholehearted commitment to that fateful decision to betray his master? '*Was it ambition, jealousy, disappointment, impatience, greed, fatigue, despair?*' (Garrett 2009.214). We're not really sure. What we do know, is that we can feel any and all of these things, and that they can lead us to say and do things we never thought we would, to compromise commitments we hold high and dear (sometimes without even realising we're doing it). Whatever it was that drove Judas to this desolation, it is **not** beyond us. Luke inserts this awful tale to remind us that there was *betrayal* in the heart of the early church. And that potential lies in our hearts as well. Ignored or

indulged, contrary feelings wreak havoc on persons and communities; we see it in the church, we see it in the world, we see it time and time again...

Thankfully there's another message contained in this story, and it's that failure, betrayal, denial and difficulty notwithstanding, God does not give up. And this is where Matthias enters the scene, a sign and symbol of hope, of redemption and renewal. Things are not left abandoned. No, the work begins again - they get on with it. A replacement for Judas is sought.

Two possible candidates are proposed, Joseph and Matthias, and when they cast lots for them, *'the lot fell on Matthias'* (26) (metaphorically, we hope, not literally!!).

Now, to modern ears, this process can sound rather primitive, even superstitious. *'How will we fill this position? ...Let's roll the dice, toss a coin, draw straws?'* Of course, it wasn't really like that. A closer look at this text reveals very definite and rigorous selection criteria. First and foremost, a candidate must know the story of Jesus. Not just the facts, not just knowing *about* Jesus, but first-hand knowledge. It must be someone who's been following closely since the beginning: *'from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us'*; someone who's absorbed his teaching (lessons on trust and provision), who saw him stand before the crowd and stumble to Calvary; someone who knew they'd run, but who on hearing rumours of resurrection, had returned to check it out. Someone who 'gets' Jesus and the deep *meaning* of his story, someone committed and ready to bear witness.

Relatedly, the requirement that it be someone who'd *'accompanied us during all that time'*, suggests that this person must have a realistic commitment to community and relational awareness. Must know what it's like to work closely with others, who's learning how to be with different personalities, as well as their own foibles. They're looking for someone with the will and capacity to hang in and let themselves be changed in the process.

So, how would you go at an interview? Would you make the second round or is more development necessary? According to Luke, a number of men met these

requirements (and yes, in this context, only men were eligible, though there were women present at the gathering and involved in the discernment). In the end, two equally suitable candidates are shortlisted. So, who's it to be? How to decide? Cast lots? Not yet. *'Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart, show us which one of these two you have chosen..."'* (24). Then, and only then do lots come out.

Now, this practice for breaking a deadlock in human choice may still seem strange to our ears. Theologian Graeme Garrett (2009:216), one of my teachers in the faith, suggests that, undergirding this seemingly dubious way of deciding important matters was the commitment to factor into this process *'space for the providential guidance of God'*:

When they had done all they humanly could to discern the way they should go, these early believers pause - deliberately - and make a kind of 'space' in the proceedings where the hand of God can manifest itself, and thus the will of God find genuine expression in the final outcome. The lot is the theological space.

In other words, the casting of 'lots' here is not about the community opting out of its responsibilities in discernment. They have exercised due diligence. They've not just thrown a dice out of the blue, nor has anyone claimed a 'hotline' to God on the basis of some private thought or feeling. This has been a communal exercise of disciplined conversation, clarifying purpose, prayerful listening and trusting relinquishment. Wise discernment requires us to balance critical judgement with open-hearted receptivity; to work together in faith.

Finally, I want to suggest that though it was Matthias chosen that day, Luke is reminding us of what disciples (saints) in every age are chosen for, which (in Peter's words) is to *'become a witness ... to his resurrection'* (22). Matthias may've formally replaced Judas as the twelfth apostle, but in the bigger church story, all of us are 'sent' (which is what 'apostle' means) - *sent* to bear witness to the living God.

To be an apostle in this sense — a witness to Christ's resurrection — is to show the world that God is alive and at work, in and through *you*. Is to show *with your life*,

in *who* and *how* you are, that God cares — for the sick, and those who are poor and oppressed; for this battered planet; for justice and truth; for reconciliation and integrity.

To be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus is to show the world that love does not give up, to testify *with our lives* in *this* community, that goodness is stronger than evil ... light is stronger than darkness ... life is stronger than death ... that God (source of love, goodness, light and life) is ultimate reality and cannot be extinguished.

They cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And, remembering him today, we recall that God has chosen us for the self-same purpose — to bear witness (with him) to the resurrection of Christ.

References

Garrett, G (2009) 'And the lot fell on Matthias', in T Frame (Ed) *Called to Minister: Vocational Discernment in the Contemporary Church*, Barton Books, Canberra.