

Numbered with the Twelve

In the name of him who died, rose again, ascended, and has been exalted on high, dear friend in Christ: In this morning's reading from Acts we find the Apostles and other followers of Jesus in that short ten day period between the Lord's ascension into heaven and the day of Pentecost. They were told by Jesus to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power from on high. So that's what they're doing: waiting. For how long? They don't know. And in my own experience, that's one of the hardest things the Lord ever asks of us: to wait. We want to get things moving. We want the Lord to act *now*. We have the sense that the time's a-wasting, and every moment not spent doing whatever it is we imagine needs to be done is a loss.

And I suppose part of that is because we only see things from our own narrow perspective. We don't see the big picture. And sometimes even though we think we're ready to move on to the next big step – whatever it is – there are other vital things that need to fall into place first. In the case of today's text, the Lord is waiting for Pentecost to arrive. It was one of the three big pilgrim festivals. You see, when the Lord sends his Holy Spirit upon the small group of his faithful ones he wants it to be on a day when the city is filled with visitors from all over the Mediterranean world – visitors who will hear the Good News of Jesus being proclaimed in their own languages and be astonished – and who will then take their new found faith in Jesus back to their own homelands where through their sharing the Word of Christ will reach even more people. The Lord knows what he's doing. And things are moving forward very nicely according to his plan and timetable. And so for the present, the Apostles wait.

And even when the Lord calls upon us to wait, there's still plenty to do. That's succinctly described in the text with the words, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to the prayers, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." It means they were meeting together for worship. They were encouraging and strengthening each other with the Words of Jesus. And in these ways they were prayerfully preparing themselves for their future ministry – not certain of what it would bring or where it would take them. We're told too that their meeting place was in an upper room – most likely the same room in which Jesus celebrated Passover the night of his arrest, and at which he instituted the Lord's Supper. It's the same room in which the resurrected Lord appeared to them on the evening of the first Easter. So it's here in this room so closely connected to Jesus' death and resurrection that they are staying – and where they were no doubt experiencing Jesus' presence – his giving of himself for them – in the Holy Supper he gave them. This too is part of their waiting and preparation.

And, as we heard, there's another important item of business to attend – one that they might not have got around to thinking about if they hadn't been required to wait. What's the issue? There's an empty space at the table, so to speak; a position that needs to be filled. Jesus originally called twelve Apostles. The number wasn't arbitrary. As you read the Scriptures, it becomes clear that certain numbers have symbolic theological meaning attached to them. In the case of twelve, it's the number of God's people – as in the twelve tribes of Israel. The Church is God's new Israel. So just as the nation of Israel came from the twelve sons of Jacob, now the Church will be founded on the teaching and authority of the twelve Apostles of Jesus. But now one of those twelve spaces is vacant.

It's Peter who stands to address the issue. He begins to speak of Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus and who guided the temple guards to where they could find him more or less alone, without crowds of admirers around him that might make taking him difficult. And as we hear Peter describe the unpleasant fate of Judas, what with his falling headlong and guts splattering all over the place, we're inclined to think, yeah, well the dirty traitor had it coming. Indeed, historically Judas has been treated as the most despised man in all of Christendom – the man we all love to hate. I've mentioned before how in Brazil and other Latin American countries they hang effigies of Judas in the open air markets on Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter. These effigies are like scarecrows, made of cloth and clothing stuffed with straw. They'll also place candies and coins inside. The Judas dummies hang all day, and then toward evening everyone will gather around while the young men beat the bejeebers out of them with wooden staffs – supposedly showing their love for Christ by the violence they vicariously inflict on the man who betrayed him. Children scoop up the goodies as they fall; which is kind of gross when you think about it, because what they're supposed to represent is poor ol' Judas' innards spilling out. This tradition, by the way, is the origin of the Mexican piñata. Try not to think about it next time you see one at a child's birthday party. But my point is that we do love to hate Judas, and that's really not a very Christian attitude.

It's not what Peter and the others were feeling. Sure, they were appalled by his actions. They hated what he did; but to them Judas had been their fellow companion in the world's greatest adventure: the three year ministry of Jesus. He had been numbered with the twelve. He was one of those few chosen to walk closely with the Lord while he walked on this earth. They shared together some of the most private and privileged moments with Jesus. They were nearest to him when he spoke. They witnessed his miracles – they had front row seats for them. They were a band of brothers who worked and ate their meals together. They laughed and joked together. They shared common dreams. No, it's without the slightest trace of smug superiority or animosity that Peter speaks of Judas. It's rather with deep sorrow at his loss, and I suspect no small amount of guilt. It's hard to escape that feeling that maybe I could have done something, said something, been more aware of what he was struggling with – how he was being tempted. Maybe I could have stopped him from falling.

Scripture is clear, however, that Judas was the architect of his own destruction. Simply put, he had another god; one made of gold. And by holding fast to this god in his heart, by refusing to let it go, he was drawn away by degrees from the One True God, and in the end turned his back on him altogether. Worse, because he had learned to trust only in his false god, even when he was sorry for what he'd done, he couldn't believe that there was forgiveness in Jesus available even for him. His story is a genuine tragedy – that one so blessed with God's revelation in Christ Jesus could throw it all away. His example stands as a warning to all of us who walk with Christ. None of us is immune to falling. And as Peter says in today's Epistle, "Your adversary the devil prowls like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Peter saw Judas get eaten. It broke his heart. And he's saying don't let it happen to you.

But in spite of its losses, the ministry of Christ's Church goes on. So it is that Peter proposes that a replacement be chosen to take the place of Judas, a man to take on the mantle of apostolic authority – to discharge faithfully the calling in which Judas so spectacularly failed. He goes on to establish the criteria for this choice. It has to be someone who was with Jesus from the very beginning, from the Baptism of John; one from that larger circle of seventy or so who were constantly close by, and who would be, therefore, intimately familiar with the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. This person must also be an eyewitness of the resurrection, someone who had seen and heard the risen Lord in that forty day period before his ascension into heaven. This is vital because that's the truth on which Christianity stands. If Jesus wasn't

raised from the dead, then there's nothing to the faith: no hope, no reason to believe. So the one to hold the office of Apostle must be able to assert: Jesus lives. He was crucified, died, and was buried; but now he's alive. I know. I've seen him with my own eyes.

The whole body of believers agreed to Peter's proposal and they set forth two qualified candidates: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. As we heard, they prayed about it and asked the Lord Jesus to decide. Then they cast lots, and Matthias was chosen. Thereafter, he was numbered with the twelve – one of the Apostles whose witness, teaching, and doctrine are the foundation of the Christian Church.

We never hear of Matthias again; but then we don't hear about most of the other eleven Apostles after this either, not by name anyway. But even if we don't hear of them, we are the living heirs of their work and testimony. We believe now because they faithfully preserved and taught the truth about Jesus the Savior, and so doing, they laid the groundwork upon which the whole Church has stood throughout the ages and stands still today.

And with that in mind, let me suggest that Matthias can be understood to represent all of us. His name, which means *student* or *disciple* – that is, *one who is learning* – reminds us that that's what we are: students of the Apostles, people who have come to faith in Jesus through their witness, and who remain in the faith precisely by staying in one accord with them, by continuing in their teaching and in prayer and in worship and in Bible study and in fellowship. Thus we have been chosen by God to be numbered with the twelve; not in the sense that we are Apostles and eyewitnesses like they were, but in that theological understanding of twelve as the number of God's people. It's people like us Jesus was referring to when he told Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." We believe in Jesus and are blessed with the gifts of his salvation thanks to the Apostles and their ministries. And by receiving their testimony you have been numbered with the twelve. And you too, like them, are called to be a disciple, always learning of Christ, and sent to bear witness to his truth to those around you.

May God our gracious heavenly Father therefore keep us from falling, and continue to preserve us now and always in the truth faith that we may be numbered with the Twelve, and remain in one accord with them in Jesus Christ, our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!