

A Share in this Ministry

In the name of him who knows the hearts of all, dear friends in Christ: This morning's reading from Acts opens with the disciples returning to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. They have just witnessed the ascension of their Lord. Jesus had just finished telling that they would be his witnesses to spread the Gospel into all the world, but they were to wait in the city until the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them and they were clothed with power from on high, when suddenly he began to rise before their eyes. They watched in amazement as higher and higher he went. At last he entered a cloud that hid him from their view. They stood there for some time still looking up, hoping to catch another glimpse of him. Who knows how long they would have stood there? But their reverie was interrupted by the voice of one of the two angels whom they hadn't noticed standing beside them. He said, "Why are you standing here looking into the sky? This Jesus whom you saw lifted up into heaven will return in the same way you saw him go." In other words, there's no time for standing around staring into heaven. Jesus is coming back. And before he gets here, there's work to do. Get on it.

And so they do. The group assembles in the large upper room that has been their meeting place for some time. It's very likely the same room in which they celebrated the Passover the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest, the room in which he washed their feet and instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion – the same room in which he appeared to them three days later after he was raised from the dead. It's fitting that they would make *this* place so closely connected to the central events of the saving Gospel their Jerusalem headquarters.

What follows is a roll call of the principle actors. St. Luke, who wrote this account, names eleven of the twelve disciples (the name of Judas being conspicuously absent), along with Mary, Jesus' mother. Also listed though not by name are the faithful women who were with Jesus throughout his ministry together with the half brothers of Jesus who only came to faith in him after his resurrection from the dead. The whole group, Luke informs us, numbers 120 souls. The number is significant. It's ten times twelve: ten being the number that symbolically represents fullness or completion, and twelve being the number of God's people – as in the twelve tribes of Israel. The idea is that the Church is the new Israel. But even more significant than the total headcount is that we're told that the group was in one accord and that they were devoting themselves to the prayers. This tells us that they were no divisions among them. They were united in heart, mind, and purpose; all confessing as one the same truths about Jesus. They were worshipping together and growing in the Word. They were looking out for each other and tending to each others' needs. In short, they were doing precisely what the church ought to be doing.

Next we get the minutes of the very first church council meeting. The main item on the agenda is the selection of a replacement for Judas as one of the twelve apostles. It's Peter who stands to bring the matter to the floor and open the discussion. And I have to believe that he does so with a heavy heart. You see, we know from the very start that Judas is the disciple who will betray Jesus, and so we cast him in the role of a villain every time he's mentioned. But that's not the way these men knew him. Judas had been one of them, handpicked by Jesus to be trained for service in a very special office in his church. He had been their friend and companion, a witness with them of the ministry of Jesus; arguably the three most amazing years in world history – and certainly the most important. Like them Judas had proclaimed Jesus' Gospel. He had driven out demons and healed the sick when Jesus gave them that authority.

From their point of view, Judas was one of us, part of our team. And now he's dead – by his own hand, no less. They are devastated.

And compounding their sorrow are the circumstances that led to his suicide. He betrayed Jesus to his enemies. He plotted with those who wanted Jesus killed and agreed to hand him over in exchange for thirty silver coins. On one hand they have to be asking with indignation, "How could he have done that?" And on the other, knowing their own weak and sinful hearts, they have to be thinking "That could have been me. Dangle the right carrot before my eyes, and I too might have betrayed Jesus."

Yes, the sad story of Judas ought to be a sober reminder to all of us that no one is past falling from grace. Even those who have enjoyed the greatest privileges regarding the Gospel, who have had the best teaching and training, who have walked closely with the Lord, who have served him in the highest offices – even they can harbor sin in their hearts and let it grow to the point where it dominates them. And if it can happen to those with the most privilege, how much more to those with less? For Judas it was greed, the desire to be rich. For others it could be sex, or an illicit relationship, or anger or gossip or pride – any sin; whatever it is, it's the thought that this sin can bring me happiness in a way that my discipleship to Christ cannot. Therefore I choose the sin. And Jesus? Well, he can die for all I care. This is why the Christian life has to be one of constant repentance, of seeking the sin in your heart, confessing it and turning from it before it gets the upper hand. That Judas could fall from grace is a warning to all of us. And certainly the apostles were thinking this as they discussed his unhappy fate.

On top of these concerns, they were no doubt dealing with the personal recriminations that happen to those who suffer the suicide of a friend. They are forced to ask, "How might I have prevented this? Maybe if I'd been there for him, been a better friend to him, watched his back for him, spoken a word of warning to him – we all suspected he was skimming from the till; maybe if I had done something to help, he would not have fallen into temptation. And maybe afterward, when he was in despair about what he'd done, I could have encouraged him, told him that Christ's forgiveness extends even to him and his part in this terrible sin." But no, I was angry with him. I judged him unworthy. I didn't help him when I could have." Yes, overlaying the apostles' grief at losing Judas there had to be a sense of guilt. To some extent they all must feel that they played a part in his crime. And all must feel that they played a part in his death as well.

Thus the account of Judas also speaks to our responsibility to look out for one another. Obviously we can't know what people are thinking or take full responsibility for their actions; but there are things we can do and say to help others – and in particular when we see them going astray. If you witness someone drifting toward sin or distancing themselves from the body of Christ, yours may be the word of concern that prevents them from falling and brings them back. Likewise, after someone has fallen and is overcome with grief and shame as Judas was, yours may be the word of Christ's forgiveness that lifts them up from despair and saves them from being lost forever. In the church, we are our brother's keeper. It's a responsibility we need to take seriously. And for which we need to repent and be forgiven when we fail.

But even with our failures and whatever setbacks or tragedies happen, the work of the church goes on. Why? Because it is the work of Jesus in the world. The apostles understood that. They also understood that it was their unique calling to be the first tier of the foundation: the twelve pillars of initial witness to the life and ministry of Jesus. They saw the saving mission of the Lord Jesus up close and personal. It was their task to make the Gospel known to the first

generation of believers. That was their share in the ministry of the church. Thus they knew they needed to find a replacement for Judas in the apostolic office he left vacant.

The one chosen would have to be someone who could bear the same witness as the other apostles, someone who had been with Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry, from the time John was baptizing to the present. It also had to be someone who had actually seen the risen Lord Jesus, who could bear personal witness to the fact that he rose from the dead because this is the central truth on which the whole faith depends. Without Jesus' resurrection, there is no Christianity. Now, we know from other accounts that Jesus had a broader following of disciples. At one point in his ministry he sent out 72 evangelists in pairs to prepare the towns and villages of Galilee for the Lord's arrival. Therefore it's likely that the two men proposed to take Judas' position, Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias, were from among that wider circle of disciples.

Both men met the qualifications. It's safe to assume that both were well regarded by the other apostles and the whole assembled church. But the decision, you'll note, was left to Jesus, the Lord of the church. After praying to be shown which man Jesus had chosen to fill the apostolic office, they cast lots over the two candidates. And the lot fell to Matthias. Thus he was numbered with the twelve.

And after this, the Scriptures are silent about him. He's never heard of again. But I don't take that as a bad thing. To be sure, after this we don't hear about most of the apostles – only Peter, James, and John. James is only mentioned because he's martyred not long after this. He bears witness to the life and ministry of Jesus by his death. The other apostles bore their witness – as they were called to do – by their lives ... and in most cases also by their deaths. The point is that they fulfilled their offices. They did what Christ called them to do. We know because the church stands even today on their witness. And the reason we don't know much about what happened to them is that their ministry wasn't about them. It was about Jesus: his life, his death for sin, and his resurrection.

This is what the ministry of Christ's church is about still today. And we all have a share in it. No, none of us has been called to the apostolic office. None of us meets the qualifications. And besides, that work is done. We already have the foundation. Our task is to build upon it. How? By doing the same things that first group of 120 did. We are to remain in one accord, standing together by confessing the same teaching and witness of the apostles. We are to continue in the prayers, that is, the ongoing worship of the church. We are to grow together in the Word, receive the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood together, and continue to make disciples by Baptizing and teaching all that Jesus commanded. And we are to continue to care for one another with our words and deeds according the talents and gifts that have been entrusted to our stewardship. This is our share in the ministry. And while we perform our various roles, we are to keep in mind that it's not about us. The church is about Jesus and his work in the world. Therefore may we with thankful hearts willingly offer to him our hands and our voices that he may accomplish through us all that he intends. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!