

Matthias

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Almighty God,
who in the place of the traitor Judas
chose your faithful servant Matthias
to be of the number of the Twelve:
preserve your church from false apostles
and, by the ministry of faithful pastors and teachers
keep us steadfast in the truth.

Our text may be found in Acts chapter 1 and verse 26:

‘And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias;
and he was added to the eleven apostles.’

Tomorrow, the 14th May, is the day in our church’s calendar when we remember St Matthias. Now if I were to ask you what you know or can recall about him, then I’m pretty certain it you, like me, won’t have much to remember except, of course, today’s passage from the Acts of the Apostles where Matthias is chosen to replace Judas Iscariot as one of the Twelve. So let me ask just three questions before ending my sermon by commenting on his martyrdom:

- Why twelve disciples ?
- What happened to Judas ?
- Why was Matthias chosen ?

Why did Jesus choose twelve men from among his followers to be his disciples, his inner circle, the Twelve ? Well, twelve does seem rather a large number and three times in the gospels, there are just three with Jesus – Peter, James and John – at the healing of Jairus’s daughter, the Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus goes aside to pray. But, for Jews, twelve is a significant number: there are twelve tribes of Israel and to have twelve disciples is symbolic, one disciple for each of the tribes of Israel: not literally, just symbolically, a reminder that the Chosen People were the first focus of the Messiah’s love and concern, teaching and ministry.

What happened to Judas ? Two different accounts in the Bible. One in Matthew’s gospel (27 v5) that he went and hanged himself, having given back the thirty pieces of silver, deeply regretting having betrayed the man he loved. One in Acts where, according to Luke, he falls down in the field he’d bought with the money from betraying Jesus and ‘**he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.**’ And the question that I tried to answer in my dramatic monologues, ‘Judas Iscariot Redeemed ?’, is whether Judas is an example of the unforgivable sin or that he was ultimately saved by the possibility of our Saviour’s love for him ?

Why was Matthias chosen ? Two reasons. First: had been with Jesus from the start – from the baptism to the ascension, an actual witness of the resurrection. Second: since there were two to choose from Matthias or Joseph Barsabbas also known as Justus, he was chosen by lot, by chance. According to William Barclay, the names of the two were written on stones then placed in a vessel which was shaken up and the first stone to fall out was God’s choice.

Sadly, there is nothing much more we know about what Matthias did. Certainly, he was there in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost and received the Holy Spirit, rushing out into the crowded street and speaking in tongues to the amazed crowd. According to tradition, Matthias preached first in Judea and then in Cappadocia near the Caspian Sea. One tradition records that he was martyred in Ethiopia; another states that he was stoned and killed with an axe in Jerusalem. Originally, his feast day was 24th February but since 1969, we have celebrated Matthias on 14th May, though in the Orthodox Church, Matthias is remembered on 9th August.

So why is Matthias important to us today ? Simply, essentially, for what he did but of which we actually know so little. But the most important fact about Matthias is something that we too can share as Christians – that he and we can be witnesses of the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 37 : Matthias

