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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
May 13, 2018 ~ “Sunday after the Ascension”

Some years ago, I worked with a wonderful priest who became a close colleague. Tragically, when only in his early 50s, he developed cancer and became seriously ill. He was inevitably off work for a long time. As he prepared for his first public reappearance after treatment, he told us that he would not become ‘a cancer bore’ but that his experience would inevitably colour everything he did. He went on to say ‘I may need convincing that some things that others think to be important are actually as important as all that.’ ‘I may need convincing that some things that others think to be important are actually as important as all that’.

As we reach the final part of Jesus’ great prayer before his arrest, as John records it in today’s Gospel reading, we cannot fail to be moved by the heartfelt words of Jesus – and we realise how much he is trying to help his disciples sort out their life’s priorities, to discern what is important and what is not. Jesus truly loves this untidy band of companions, and longs with passion for them to become bound to God and to one another as they have already begun to be when in his company. And then we realise that **we** are the ones who have come to belief through the witness of the apostles, and we become aware of the previous generations who have handed down the succession to us.

I have long been a keen fan of the tradition of remembering the saints of the Church, as they are commemorated year by year, those who have gone before us. It would be fascinating to be able to meet them and to discover the sort of people they were. I suspect there would be an enormous variety of person. Some we would immediately warm to and some we would probably look at and wonder how on earth they had actually become saints! We probably have a typical view of a saint as someone meek and mild, always good, never cross or bad-tempered and just radiating

the goodness and the glory of God all the time. Well, I suspect some might have been like that – but probably most weren't anything near that!

One saint that has always fascinated me is St Matthias, of whom we heard in today's reading from Acts – the only time he appears in the whole of the New Testament. Already, we are told, there are about 120 baptised believers and Peter is the leader. Their first job was to choose a Judas replacement, the main criterion being that a candidate should have been an eyewitness to the entire ministry of Jesus. Sensibly, they pray for it to be God's choice – not 'help us to choose wisely' but 'show us who you have chosen' – an example that is well worth following.

So Matthias was the man chosen by lot and he was among the apostles to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. However almost nothing is known about his subsequent life and death, though there is a tradition that he preached in Judea and Cappadocia and even Ethiopia before himself being crucified. A gospel, said to have been written in his name is now, sadly, lost. His emblem is an axe supposed to have been the instrument of his martyrdom – and actually tomorrow is his feast day.

But it is the manner of his choosing which is particularly interesting for us to reflect on. He was chosen by lot – by a public vote amongst the believers, all 120 of them. The point is that all the other apostles were chosen and called by Jesus, acting no doubt both on his fine judgement of human beings and on the promptings of God. Of course we may wonder at the character and make up of some of these apostles; one who was chosen betrayed Jesus, one denied knowing him not just once but three times – and some of the others could be said to be obtuse and, to be quite honest, difficult in the extreme. Yet maybe that is the point. God knew what he was doing. Maybe these are just the kind of human beings that Jesus deliberately chose in order to help us appreciate that God still calls all manner of persons to leadership in his Church today. And significantly, when they have to choose between Barsabbas (about whom nothing is known) and Matthias, they pray for it to be God's choice – not 'help us to choose wisely' but 'show us who you have chosen'.

And that is the point. God always can be trusted upon to choose wisely and it is up to us to be open to the promptings of his Spirit as we discern his choice of person –

for almost anything – but not least for those who offer themselves to some form of ministry and service in the Church. For many Christians, their lives will have been changed by an encounter with the risen and ascended Lord, whenever and however it may have happened. The disciples were changed by their experience – to the extent that they had to continue his work on earth.

What each of us has to realise is that the future of the church, the continuation of the Christian faith, depends upon us. We cannot duck our responsibility and just leave it to someone else. It has to be a main priority for us as individuals and for us as a Church. We all have to be open and welcoming to those new to our Church. It cannot be left up to one or two individuals, or even worse, just to the Priest-in-Charge. We all have the ability to encourage and this must be a priority. Remember the words of my colleague with which I started ‘I may need convincing that some things that others think to be important are actually as important as all that.’

Maybe each of us can resolve today to get our priorities right as we celebrate the Ascension and as we look forward to celebrating next Sunday the feast of Pentecost, the birth of the Church. We all have the chance to start afresh, to aim for a good balance in our lives. Let’s all try to do that before it is too late.