

Matthias And Paul

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Father, grant that as we open our hearts to your word, you may open your word to our hearts, we ask in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. On this Sunday after Ascension Day, which if we are to get used to the new and ecumenical ways of the church, we have to call Easter 7, which is not nearly as dramatic for people like me, but others, I suppose, who are brought up with it will get used to it and will have lovely associations with Easter 7 that I now have with the Sunday after Ascension Day.

That doesn't mean very much to others. There's one of the things that I'd like to tell you, and that is in the course of the service this morning, we're going to ring the bell. Well, the bell tower has been silent for the whole 40 years or 35 years of the life of this congregation. It's never said a word. I mean, there's never been a bell there to ring, but this morning there is. One of the great things about the bell that's there to ring is that it's been out there at the front door for five years, waiting for somebody to hang it.

And if you want to know one description of the church, it's something with a whole lot of brilliant ideas laying around waiting to be put into effect.

And it's just, that's where the problem comes. The thing is there. The message is there. The work is there to be done, but getting around to do it is the struggle of our life as a congregation.

[1 : 54] And I'm just very grateful to Gene Valavance, who took it in hand to make it happen after these many years. And so that it's just a good little parable from life that I'd like to share with you this morning.

Before we get down to the essential business of looking at that passage of scripture, which has been assigned to you all who've been involved in the Bible study program from Acts chapter one. And a very peculiar passage of scripture it is too. And when you first read it, I was quite overcome by the fact of the total irrelevance of it to anything that might pertain to our life and work as a parish. And then as you become fascinated by and absorbed with it as the word of God for us as a congregation on this Lord's Day, then something very rich and full comes out.

So read with, no, don't you read, just listen to me, but you be following, if you will, in the Pew Bibles. As I read to you from Acts chapter one, page 112 in the Blue Pew Bibles.

[3 : 16] And I'd like to start at verse 14. It gives in verse 13 the list of the apostles. And then in verse 14 it says of them, All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers.

Great company of people. And then it says, In those days Peter stood up among the brethren. That's a signal from St. Luke, who's the writer of this book, to tell you that something's going to happen.

Something's going to be said. When somebody stands up, you have to wait for it. Because it's coming. So Peter stood up among the brethren. A company of persons in all about 120.

Nice ratio in there. There were 12 apostles and 120 people in the company. One leader for every 12 people. That's a good ratio for a congregation like this.

A lot of leadership is required. There's probably 300 people in church this morning. So there's got to be 30 people in positions of leadership in order for us to follow the model that's laid down for us this morning.

[4 : 30] And who are those leaders and how do we recognize them? That's just a little tidbit as we read through here. The company of 120 people. Peter addresses them and says, Brethren, verse 16, I was having been brought up in an Anglican church.

It was a surprise to me to go to congregations where I was addressed as Brother Robinson or Brother Harry. And I disliked being addressed in that way very much.

And that's only because of my, I'm shy and awkward and don't find it easy to do. It's my fault. It's not the fault of the person that's saying it.

But there is a sense in which it's, in Anglican churches, it's Father Harry and Father Robinson, and I dislike that too. And the reason I dislike it, I suppose, is because it creates the, I mean, you can say to somebody, brother, who really isn't your brother.

And you can say to somebody, father, whom you have no intention of obeying. So, why bother saying it? And if, if the relationship of brother to brother is really there, if the relationship of child to a father in the spirit is really there, then you hardly need to use the term, do you?

[5 : 59] So, it's one of the contradictions we get into in the inconsistencies of our life. Now, again, I'm talking from my subjective experience, but we've got to make it so that if you're going to say, the sermon is now over.

All right. All right.

If you're going to say, brother and father, and to regard ourselves as brethren one to another, we've got to make that work in a more practical way.

The experience of it is what Peter expresses when he says, brethren, even as we start our service, dearly beloved brethren.

And it says, the scripture has to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who was guided to those, who was guided to those who arrested Jesus.

[7 : 09] So, you have the company of Christians together, and then Peter stands up to address them as a company of people who are very much united in what they've been through.

Because, remember, this is the company who have crawled back quietly together and are meeting in the upper room, where perhaps the Last Supper had been celebrated, and there they are having recovered from the shame and humiliation of their desertion of the Lord Jesus during his trial and during his crucifixion, and they're slowly being drawn back.

He who has ascended as king is working in their hearts by the Holy Spirit to draw them back, and now they're beginning to try and work together to see what obedience to Jesus Christ really means. And so, Peter starts his talk by saying, the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David. But he says, brethren, the Scripture, the Holy Spirit, the mouth of David, and us.

So that the sequence is from the Scripture, from the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of David, to the Scriptures, to us. That's how it works.

[8 : 36] Now, lots of people are concerned about the matter of Christian guidance. How do I know where I will find a wife or husband? How do I know what God wants me to do?

How do I know where he wants me to go? How do I know what lies ahead of me for the year? And the pattern that's established here in this first chapter of the history of the early church is that the way it works is that God speaks to you by his Spirit through the Scriptures.

And that it's very difficult to know the guidance of God without a consistent diet of Scripture.

In other words, it's through the reading of Scripture on a weekly or daily personal basis. It's the familiarity with Scripture that allows God the Holy Spirit to speak to you and to direct you.

And that's how it started in the beginning. So we need to look at that. And that's the basis on which Peter suggests to them that they go ahead.

[9 : 47] And he talks about the fact that they have to replace Judas. Judas who, as you will, if you read between the passages that were read, had gone out and committed suicide.

That is death that comes from within us rather than death that's imposed on us from the outside.

And we have always, up until the present, been very anxious that death should be imposed on us, not that we should generate it from within.

And so that we are slain by our own hands, so to speak. We have many sophisticated ways of doing that, and I suppose some of them take years to accomplish.

But it's the sense of living in the power of the resurrection, of knowing that the ultimate triumph is in the risen life of Christ rather than the ultimate end being in the self-imposed death of the body.

That's considered to be the end for lots of people, and they choose that end as Judas did. But we're to live for life, not to live for the goal of final annihilation by death.

[11 : 11] That's what Judas did. And now they were in the business of trying to replace him. And so Peter, so the story goes on in verse 21, as he describes what has to be done.

One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us, one of

these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.

So they were looking for a twelfth man. They were looking for somebody to take some position of authority, and that out of these twelve men would come that witness out of which the church would continue to exist.

The church exists in this year of our Lord, 1985, because of the witness of those twelve men. The witness they have left us to the life of Jesus, beginning from the baptism of John in the River Jordan until the resurrection.

And they witnessed his teaching, they witnessed his miracles, they witnessed his life, his death, and his resurrection. And they bore witness to that, and the record of their witness is the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

[12:33] That's the apostolic witness. And it's because we are convinced of the truth of the witness that we are made into a similar kind of community.

We are the community that has accepted that witness as pointing unerringly to the truth about who we are and who God is and what his purpose is.

So that it was important to them that the twelfth man should be named. And so they went to work to do it. And then you'll see how they went to work to do it if you read on in verse 23.

They put forward two, Joseph, called Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justice, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men.

It's like the prayer we begin this service with. Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be opened. Lord, in verse 24, For, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen.

[13:44] Take the place in this ministry and apostleship for which Judas turned aside to go to his own place. So they recognized that as a community they had a ministry, that is, that they were to serve, and they were to bear witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And that's what we have to do. Well, what they did then was, and you can read it, verse 26, Now the rest of the Acts of the book of Acts goes and tells you about what Matthias did.

He doesn't, does it? You never hear of him again. He disappears right off the face of the map, spiritually, at the end of chapter 1. He was elected and gone. Maybe you've had members of Parliament like that.

You never see them again. Well, this is what happened here. So that you might say that the focus of this sermon is sort of Paul and Matthias.

Because it seems very evident that Paul was the man whom God had chosen, and Matthias was the man who the church chose.

[15:12] And it raises wonderful problems. And I'd like just to share briefly some of those problems with you. First, this story takes place between Ascension Day and Pentecost.

That is, it's a kind of picture of the church trying to operate apart from the Holy Spirit. They had all the facts that were there.

Their witness was complete from the birth, from the baptism of John until the resurrection of Jesus. They were the first-hand witnesses of all these events. And this witness by itself belonged to them in a way that has never belonged to any other generation in the history of the church.

But even with all that, something was missing. And the thing that was missing was the presence of their risen Lord by his Holy Spirit in their midst, enabling them and showing them the way ahead.

So, it's at a peculiar time. And you can imagine that since that time, there are many Christian churches who have survived on the witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but never known the reality of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

[16:28] That's a dangerous position to be in as a congregation. But this congregation was in that position, so it's probably not an unknown position.

The second thing that I want you to notice by way of a problem is, is Peter is still his impulsive self. In spite of all that he's been through, he's sitting around with these people praying and doing what they do back in verse 13.

Do you remember where it says that they were there with one accord, devoting themselves to prayer?

Well, Peter got, I think, a little impatient with prayer and with waiting and decided that something had to be done. Now, every congregation consists of problems like that.

The people who are prepared to pray and wait and the people who insist that something has to be done not sooner than right now. And those people are very good for each other.

[17 : 33] They desperately need each other. But that's part of the tension of the church, too. And they were called upon to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and Peter went ahead and decided he had to introduce some elements of organization into this structure.

And you know how hopeless it can be when the church becomes all structure and no power, and it's almost as bad as when the church is all power and no structure.

So you again have this problem, and Peter walks into the midst of it. Then if you look at it as a human organization, you see the New Testament scholars suspect that this book was written during the life of the second generation of Christians.

And so they were trying to go back in memory to put together how it was that God intended the church to be organized.

The church, through the preaching of the witness, had spread throughout the whole of the Mediterranean world. And having spread that far, they'd run into all sorts of problems.

[18 : 56] Problems as to who was really a Christian and who wasn't a Christian, and problems as to how you should organize, and who were the leaders, and what authority they had, and what discipline they had to exercise, and how they were to control and to relate to one another.

All these problems came out in the first generation. So when Luke is writing this, he's going back to try and carefully record how it all began.

And of course, this passage is very important to our Roman Catholic brethren because the constitution of the leadership and authority of the church is terribly important to them.

And I might say it should be to us. But what we have to decide is what the scripture is saying about it. How are we to relate to one another?

You have, if I could suggest to you a lovely contrast, which impresses itself upon me, you have those Christians who are so full and overflowing with the experience of Christ that it's enough for them to say, I am a born-again Christian.

[20 : 11] And that may mean that they are very irregular indeed with respect to the formalities of baptism and confirmation and catechism and training in the church, very loosely connected to any of that.

And yet they have the dynamic of a powerful and personal experience of Christ in their lives. On the other hand, you have those people who, as one person put it so beautifully, I am a card-carrying Anglican.

And that means when it comes to orthodoxy, my situation is impeccable. When it comes to any sense of the dynamic and personal presence and reality of Christ in my life, there isn't much there. And so you have that tension between those two people. We had a wedding here yesterday. In fact, we had several weddings, but one which was of particular significance to me.

And I was reminded again of the fact that I often run into that lots of dynamic young people in our society are quite prepared to shack up together and to take their knocks as they work out the relationship.

[21 : 35] And that, I'm sure, is a very good thing. But it's a bit like the born-again Christian, you know, that might burn out very rapidly.

And so that you have to, what you do, I guess, is to put some structure together and within that structure to try and contain the reality of the dynamic experience of God's Holy Spirit in the life of a congregation.

So that we as Christians probably need both. And it's thought that this particular story, which in the whole scope of the Acts of the Apostles is a peculiar kind of story, this particular story of the election of the Twelfth Man is an attempt to give some order and structure to the beginnings of the Church and to establish the meaning of apostleship and what this apostolic dimension of the Church is all about.

And that was brought in there in the same way that I think that when in the early enthusiasms of falling in love for young people probably needs to be harnessed by the heavy hardware of marriage counseling and weddings and receptions and all those things that go along with it that give order and form and structure and bring a whole lot of people in on the pattern of what's happening.

Those things need to happen. Because in order for us to go on in our Christian life, we need that kind of structure. Well, that I think is what this story is about.

[23 : 22] There's one anomaly in the story, and that is that Christians were casting lots. And no doubt that could be expounded to show that everybody should be buying 649 tickets.

I don't think it's saying that. I think it may be the way of making a decision. But with Christ as our living head, indwelling us by his Holy Spirit, calling us to the reading of Scripture, and to fellowship and studying one with another, and debating back and forth, and arguing for the truth of what we find in Scripture, I think God can lead us to the decisions we need to make.

And indeed, I think as we've debated the problem of children and communion, and as we're going to be debating the problems of liturgy and the form of liturgy over the next months and years in the church, all those things are the very groundwork out of which we acknowledge and seek more perfectly to be obedient to Jesus Christ as he guides and directs us.

Not just in our personal lives, but in our life together as the Church of Christ. Well, there you have that contrast.

The contrast, and I think that's why it's the contrast, in a sense, between Matthias, who is elected and never heard from again, and the Anglican who is confirmed and never heard from again, that kind of contrast on the one hand, and the picture of Paul, who by a very irregular process comes into the dynamic of the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and is so filled and so empowered by God that he is recognized and acknowledged to be the apostles of the Gentiles.

[25 : 38] The title which was conferred upon Matthias was in fact demonstrated by Paul. Paul, and the tension which exists in the Church and must always exist between those who bear the title but not the dynamic, and those who have the dynamic and therefore should be given the title.

And that, you can't resolve that. That's a chicken and an egg proposition. And you can't break it down. But you can understand the reality of it. And we can understand the reality of it.

And acknowledge the reality of it. Next Sunday morning, several adults in our congregation are being confirmed or baptized as adults.

And that's very important. It's very important that this should be for them not just a formal enrollment in the Church of Jesus Christ, but should be such an experience of the dynamic of God's Holy Spirit in their lives, that they are empowered to live and witness and serve in the ministry of Christ's Church with the whole of their energies for the whole of their life.

And you could be praying for them through this week. That wonderful tension which is in the Church and on which we are so dependent. We say, I'm High Church and you're Low Church.

[27 : 07] The High Church desperately needs the Low Church and the Low Church desperately needs the High Church. I am sacramentalist and you are evangelical, but they need each other in this kind of built-in New Testament dynamic, which comes out so strongly in the passage this morning.

And may God grant that you in your life know both the formal belonging, because that's desperately important. When you go and visit some elderly saint from the congregation in the last stage of their terminal illness, they don't talk to you a lot about the dynamic of the experience of the Holy Spirit in that moment, because they feel somewhat overwhelmed by their physical circumstances.

But very often they have the sense of the continuing reality of God's grace ministered to them through the structures of the sacraments and through the Word of God.

And these are the things that continue to have meaning for them. Long after the kind of flame of experience has burnt low, the reality of all that belongs to them and their inheritance in Christ and still continue to flame brightly in their hearts.

Because of this tension, the tension between Paul and Matthias, which is seemingly built into the New Testament and which seems to be an inescapable reality of our Christian life.

[28 : 52] Amen. Amen. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt, where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. We sing together now our offertory hymn number 246.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

[30 : 42] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.
Thank you.