

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021**  
**The Seventh Sunday of Easter**

**Collect**

Risen, ascended Lord,  
as we rejoice at your triumph,  
fill your Church on earth with power and compassion,  
that all who are estranged by sin  
may find forgiveness and know your peace,  
to the glory of God the Father.  
Amen.

**Acts 1:15-17, 21-end**

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, 'Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.'

So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout 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 must become a witness with us to his resurrection.' So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

**John 17:6-19**

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.'

## Sermon

There is something that I just love about the fact that this morning's readings have been placed together. On the one hand we have the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, in which a decision is made that, following Judas's betrayal, it is necessary to find someone to replace him as a member of the twelve. The account that we have is utterly faithful, recognising the need for the scriptures to be fulfilled, and identifying the relevant criteria potential candidates need to fulfil, and the decision is taken by drawing lots. Here we have logic and process.

On the other hand, we hear a part of Jesus's prayer to God in the farewell discourses of John's gospel. His words are impassioned and profound, holding his disciples before God in prayer. It is as much poetry as prose, and the concepts about which Jesus speaks are far-reaching and wide-ranging. He addresses matters of identity, of belonging, of salvation and of truth, to name but a few. And, just like the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, it is filled with faith.

I wonder whether you have different reactions to each of these readings. Whether you have a love for the poetic, or whether you have an affinity with the logical. Perhaps you can find a connection with both.

What thrills me about the juxtaposition of these two readings this morning is the way it helps us to recognise the complexity of our faith – why it is that being a follower of Jesus just isn't easy. And sometimes, by recognising that what we're doing isn't easy, we are able to cut ourselves – and others – a little slack, and notice where we succeed, instead of dwelling on the challenges.

At the heart of Jesus's prayer to the Father is his recognition of the challenges presented by life for his followers. When I was training for ministry, a phrase that I sometimes heard was that priests are called to be "in the world, but not of the world" and the same could be said for any Christian. This might sound grand, and it certainly raises more questions than it answers. Yet it is in some ways what Jesus is talking about in his prayer.

It's a matter of identity. We are all born into the world, and as Christians we recognise two key things about the world into which we are born. The first is that it was created by God – just as we are – and as such is filled with the possibility of goodness, and indeed was created *for* goodness. Yet we also know paradoxically that in this beautiful world created by God, things go wrong. Sometimes what goes wrong is part of the natural order – natural disasters of various kinds. And sometimes it is the result of bad decisions – the ways corruption, selfishness, greed and so many other forms of evil contaminate what was made for goodness.

So the question for each of us is this: how will we live in this world, which is both part of God's good creation, and yet where some of the ways of the world simply don't align with God's loving will?

And the answer, emphasised by Jesus in his prayer to the Father, is a matter of identity. It is about who we belong to; where our allegiances lie; what comes first. As Jesus prays, he paints an image for us in which we belong to God in the same way as he does – a relationship that is close and intimate, defined by love. He recognises, too, that it is not our own strength that is important, but rather the strength of God's love. He is almost pleading with God to keep the disciples – and us – safe, recognising that living in the world, yet following the will of God, is far from easy. In the end only God can hold us.

If you're anything like me, inspiring though these words undoubtedly are, at certain times, perhaps when I'm reading the news headlines and recognising just how far from God's will the world has travelled, I can find myself wringing my hands, and feeling just a little helpless. And that is why I find it so helpful that these two readings have been put together.

Those first disciples were in many ways no different from us. Undoubtedly they lived in a world that presented the same fundamental challenge, of being a part of God's good creation, yet being subject to the ways of flawed human beings. And what they chose to do was, quite simply, to make a start.

Step one: choose a new apostle. Jesus chose twelve, and we now only have eleven. The scriptures say we need twelve, so who will it be? And how will we choose? Perhaps it helped them to know that one of the original twelve had gone wrong. However faithfully they set out, and however carefully they sought to follow God's will, they must have known that they would not always get it right. Yet that did not have to mean that they didn't set out. That they didn't make a start. That they didn't try. Mistakes are a cause for repentance, not for stopping trying.

And, on this day of our Annual Parochial Church Meeting, there is something that I find rather heartening about this morning's readings. Because, two thousand years down the road, and on another continent, we too are keeping on trying. Each year we have an opportunity to pause and ask ourselves in what ways we are on the right track. To consider the extent to which we have been following God's call, and whether we are being called in a different direction.

Just like those first disciples, we recognise that we don't have all of the answers, yet we do have tools at our disposal. The scriptures; prayer; a knowledge of the history of St. Mary's across the years. And, perhaps most importantly, fellow travellers along the way. And on this day of our APCM, it is helpful to hear that prayer of Jesus to his Father – because it is a prayer for us, too. Calling us into an ever closer walk with God, wherever that may lead.

Amen.