

Acts 1.15-17, 21-26

The Lord Jesus had been raised from death and for forty days had appeared to his disciples. In those forty days he had constantly spoken to them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). In summary, he had been emphasising the two “musts” of history. The first must was that God’s Christ “must” suffer and rise. That had happened. The second must was that the gospel “must” be preached to all nations. Repentance and forgiveness of sins in the Name of Jesus must be proclaimed. The disciples were witnesses to these things and they were to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with God’s powerful Holy Spirit and then take their primary place in that proclamation (Lk 24:44-49).

As the apostles waited the Holy Spirit’s falling they, together with the women and Mary and his brothers, devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 1:14). This was following the command and promise of Jesus that the heavenly Father would give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (Lk 11:13).

It was during this period that the infant church was confronted with its first issue without Jesus being with them. We shall reflect on the way they raised the issue, the decision they made, the outcome of that decision and how we might apply that to our inevitable problems.

Peter Raised the Problem:

Ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven Peter took a leadership role, and drew the attention of the hundred and twenty or so disciples present, to a matter he felt he needed to raise.

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During the last supper with Jesus, embarrassingly, there had been a dispute among the disciples about who would be the greatest. Jesus again taught them that in his kingdom greatness consisted in serving and then went on to say that as they had continued with him in his trials so he would assign to them a kingdom just like the Father had assigned to him a kingdom. They would fellowship at his table in his kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Lk 22:24-28).

Peter pointed out that there was now a vacancy in the twelve that needed to be filled. Judas, who had been allotted a ministry of fellowshiping with Jesus and judging Israel, had been involved in the arrest of Jesus. Peter was clear in pointing out that Judas' betrayal was according to the Old Testament scripture and ordained by God but it did necessitate the filling of that vacancy. No doubt he could recall that Jesus had spoken of twelve disciples sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel in the new world (Matt 19:28). There were now only eleven disciples. A twelfth needed to be chosen.

Peter Offered a Solution:

Peter suggested that the brothers should choose one from among them to fill the vacancy. This person should be a man who had two qualities. Since Jesus spoke of his disciples being a "witness of these things" then firstly he should have been with Jesus from the day of his baptism til his ascension. Secondly he should especially have been a witness to Jesus' resurrection.

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The group decided on two qualified persons and put them forward. There was Joseph, called Barsabbas (Son of the Sabbath?) who, like many other Jews, bore a Gentile name as well, Justus. There was also Matthias. What were they to do now they had two candidates? The group prayed, "Lord you know the hearts of all men, show 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." Within the bounds of the qualities being filled and in the context of devout prayer they then cast lots. The lot fell on Matthias and he was enrolled with the eleven apostles.

What outcome can we observe?

The mention of Matthias here is the only mention of Matthias in our New Testament. We would think that the most likely person to mention Matthias would be Luke, the writer of Acts, but his major concern is writing about the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome so we can draw no conclusion from his silence about the last chosen of the twelve or others he does not mention.

What we can observe from Luke is the remarkable ministry of the apostle Paul and also from Paul's letters the significant ministry that James, the brother of our Lord, exercised in the early church with its mission. Because of these two outstanding ministries some have wondered if the choice of Matthias was a mistake. Luke himself offers no comment on the wisdom of the choice. He simply relates what happened.

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What Lesson is there for us?

At the very beginning of this homily we noted the Risen Lord Jesus endorsing the Old Testament scripture which spoke of two “musts”. One was that the Christ “must” suffer and rise. That had already occurred in Jesus. The other was that repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name “must” be preached to all nations. In one sense Luke’s story of the gospel travelling to Rome, the centre of the Empire, means that the gospel had reached the end of the world within a generation. In another sense we see in our time the work has not yet been completed but we know it will.

Well what are we to do? Like Peter and that one hundred and twenty early Christians, to the best of our knowledge, we are to keep trying to obey the scriptures and pray for God’s progressing the gospel. Perhaps we will get the method right. Perhaps not! What we can be sure of is that the Lord who is the director of his mission will ensure its completion.

Keep reading the scripture! Keep obeying what we think God is telling us to do! Keep checking our plans in the fellowship of disciples! God will accomplish his stated purpose of having the good news of repentance and forgiveness in the name of Jesus in all the world. The scripture says it. The Risen Lord says it. God says it. It must and will happen.