

Matthias – the Man, the Myth, the Legend

Acts 1:12-26

Our first reading falls on the heels of the Ascension account in which Jesus is lifted up and disappears from sight behind a cloud. So you would think that would mark the end of His ministry. Distance learning is not impossible, but it truly lacks the same quality if Jesus is not physically in the midst of His disciples. It appears to be the end for the lonely Eleven. Without Jesus they are dead in the water. Now Peter and Andrew can return to their nets with John and James. Matthew can go back to collecting taxes, and all the others can disperse and go about their own business. You strike the shepherd and the sheep scatter. That's how you might expect the story to read. That's apparently how the story read when other messianic types rose up against the Romans only to fall flat on their faces. The rabble are put down and dispersed and the rest is history. Not so with Jesus!

Remarkably the opposite effect is recorded here in the Acts of the Apostles. "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer..." says verse 14. Jesus being taken up, up, and away only served to fortify and cement this rag-tag band of brothers. Under the direction of Peter, the same one who denied Jesus three times, the disciples roll up their sleeves and go to work. His opening remarks at the planning conference are a telling sign of things to come. "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled..." The Scripture is the *modus operandi* for all that is about to take place as these men devote themselves to prayer in public worship. The Scripture is that which bonds them together. The Scripture shapes and forms discussion and decision making as the early Church continues the work of the Master here on earth.

What do these sacred Scriptures reveal? How are the lonely Eleven expected to carry on in the days and months to come? First on the agenda is some old business to tend to. The matter of Judas is unfinished business on the docket. Directed by the holy Scriptures, the disciples of Jesus are quick to acknowledge that Judas was one numbered among them. He was a brother who shared in the ranks alongside them "in this ministry." But we know how that disaster ended. A commentary is given of the gory details. If you missed it in today's reading, you can revisit it tonight when you put your grandson or granddaughter to bed. I'm sure they'll appreciate a good bedtime story.

Moving forward, the united Eleven resolve to fill the void left in accord with Scriptural directives. "Let another take his office." The Lord of the Church intended there to be a replacement chosen. That is clear from the text. The first item on the apostolic duty chart handed down from the General is to fill the ranks. An election is conducted, but we have no canvassing of neighborhoods or political maneuvering to sway the constituents. There is no campaign fundraiser at \$100 a plate, no stumping, no push to post signs in the Jerusalem neighborhoods. The truth of the matter is that we know very little about the two candidates. Of the two forwarded on the ballot, one man is known by various names: he is the "Joseph Barsabbas Justus" ticket. One can only speculate what his running mate was named. The other man is simply known by Matthias. What kind of qualifications did they have? We don't know. Did these men have wives and children that would be able to live comfortably in the parsonage? We don't know that either. What about their golf handicap, did either have a fishing boat or RV? Who knows?

All the things we look for in a worthy pastor to serve us in central Montana are glaringly absent in the call meeting that took place in the Upper Room. Justus and Matthias were both around and among the disciples in the previous three years of Jesus' earthly ministry, eye-witnesses fully familiar with what Jesus taught and did by way of miracles and resurrection from the dead. Beyond that simple requirement, we are given no details. It remains a great mystery to us where they came from or where they ended up going. Here is the only mention made of these men. They are but a blip on the radar of church history. And that is the genius of the Office of the Holy Ministry then and now. Their anonymity keeps us from focusing on trivial matters, and instead the Gradual for Lent becomes the true object of our collective longing: [Oh come] let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2). Matthias is here today and gone tomorrow. He's numbered with the eleven apostles while his Master is numbered with the transgressors. He fulfills his ministry as a servant of the Word, a pastor to the flock, a prince of the Church, and down through the ages the faithful carry on in accordance with the Holy Scriptures.

The old Latin hymn we often sing aptly captures the insignificance of individual achievements in the grand scheme of Christ's Church Triumphant: "Lo, the apostles' holy train join Thy sacred name to hallow; prophets swell the glad refrain, and the white-robed martyrs follow, and from morn to set of sun through the Church the song goes on" (LSB 940.3). This rather mundane and lackluster ministry of St. Matthias is further de-emphasized, fading away into oblivion, in this marvelous incite of Dr. Herman Sasse: "It is not we who are able to maintain the Church, nor could those before us, nor will those who come after us be able to do so. It is only He who says, 'Lo, I am

with you always, to the close of the age.' Oh, if one could only believe this! Oh, if we could but learn something from this great and childlike trust of Luther's! How much less would cares for the Church oppress us if we would only cast all our cares upon Him who has taken the care of the Church upon Himself. How differently we would then do what He bids us do for the sake of the preservation of the Church. Only when we have this great faith in Him who wondrously preserves His Church, only then do we know how the Church is sustained. How is the Church sustained? 'Sanctify them in the truth; Thy Word is truth.' 'Through the Word the Church was brought into existence; through the Word the Church is preserved.' So Luther once said. As the Word founded the Church so the Word of Christ preserves the Church. Not the most brilliant of human organizing, not the most splendid liturgy, not the wisest of men, not the most splendid church buildings preserve the Church. It is done by the Word alone, by the plain Word of the Gospel as the saving message of the forgiveness of sins" (Herman Sasse, Jesus Intercedes For His Church).

Today the Church of Christ, founded and preserved upon the Word of Christ and in keeping with the Sacred Scriptures, celebrates the lives of three young people as they make their public confession of that which we all believe together with one accord. We rejoice that they are numbered among those in the holy train, among those who from morn to set of sun through the Church the song goes on. Today is a day of great thanksgiving for their hearts and hands and lips and lives of service to God. But greater still is our collective rejoicing that there is no "I" in Church. Just as the newly elected and ordained Matthias took his office in obscurity never to be seen or heard from again, so will our voices blend and meld with these unholy three in the common confession...I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH, THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS, THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY, AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING. AMEN.

The peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.