

Call & Response

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

I found myself on Monday reading the Acts reading and wondering – why did the appointment of a new apostle have to wait until after the Ascension? Of course there are many potential answers to this question and little evidence to give an exact answer, so maybe the better question is why did Luke see it as necessary to place this story after the ascension?

Acts, you may recall, is essentially the story of how the first disciples responded to their experiences of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Throughout the book it explores what it means to live the life that Jesus taught about in the different contexts in which they found themselves. As I mentioned last week, in the ascension story, we hear Jesus talking about mission to “Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.” Most of our readings this year have focused on the first two, but the last two weeks’ readings were the start of that mission to the “ends of the earth.”

However, the growing church faces a problem and that is how to provide effective leadership in the community especially as it grows both in numbers and geographically. There are a few stories of the early church dealing with this issue. In chapter six we hear of the first Deacons whose task is to make sure the vulnerable in the community are not neglected (so the apostles could focus on teaching).

In today's reading a new apostle is elected. In Hebrew tradition the number twelve was significant, representing the complete Israel (consider the twelve tribes), so Jesus had twelve disciples. This is disrupted by the betrayal and later suicide of Judas (those verses are skipped over in the lectionary, so I won't go into it other than that it contradicts account in Matthew). The number of apostles is incomplete and something has to be done. Without a twelfth apostle the restoration of Israel (another theme in Acts) is not going to be able to occur.

As we read this story, we read of two important approaches that are used in combination. Firstly, there is the qualification: The person proposed for apostleship must have followed Jesus throughout his entire ministry and have been a witness to the resurrection. The second approach, is discernment and being open to the will of God. The prayer and casting of lots was how this second approach was worked out in Jewish tradition and we read of it in our Acts story today.

You might notice there is something missing – I wonder what Joseph and Matthias think of this nomination. Were they excited, scared, non-plussed, not really wanting it? Possibly a combination of all this and more. To gain the qualification needed an individual commitment – it was approximately three years of being a faithful follower.

The other thing I found myself wondering was how Joseph Barabbas reacted to not being selected. He had made himself vulnerable and the discernment was that he was not the one. He had been just as faithful a disciple as Matthias and yet he was not chosen. It was not even a sense of “not at this time.” Interestingly, this is the only time that either Joseph or Matthias are mentioned, though later tradition gives various stories about what they did after the events of this day.

The potential responses of Joseph are worth considering. Often these days we think of a sense of call as being something that is down to individuals. I have heard plenty of stories from our Candidates for Ministry committee of receiving phone calls from people in other traditions saying “God has told me I am called to be a minister in the

Uniting Church." Sometimes they say they have a suitable qualification, but not always. Often these people do not take kindly to being told how the Uniting Church tests that call over time.

This is a far cry from the early days of the church where the community's discernment was more important than an individual's thoughts on the matter. One story from the Roman era is of the Bishop locking the congregation into the church building and saying they will not be let out until they have selected someone to be ordained! Obviously I am not suggesting we return to that approach.

Like the early church we are also at a time reflecting on how we be the people of God in our context. This context looks very different from the early church. For a start, our language and culture is substantially different. Then we have technology that was not even dreamed of in their day. We have health care and social security for those who need it (even with the current issues), we have mapped virtually the whole earth and are exploring the skies. It would be mind-blowing for a person of the early church to contemplate what we have today.

And with these changes, we have different challenges and issues. What does it mean to be the church when people have enough and therefore don't need to rely on God's grace, as was the case in the early days? What does it mean to be the church in a society where people are caught up in so many different options of things to do? What does it mean to be the church when the government has (rightly) taken on many of the functions that were traditionally done by the church, such as health care?

As we look towards the future of our congregation and the new possibilities for ministry and mission, the community will be continuing to discern what we do and how it is led. Let me encourage you to be open to that prompting of the Spirit. This might be a prompt to suggest to someone they could be involved... it might also be the prompt of someone suggesting the same to you.

Like the first Christian community, let us be open to where God is calling us and how God is calling us. Next week we will be commemorating Pentecost – the coming of the Spirit. Where will this Spirit lead us through the coming year?