

SUNDAY AFTER THE ASCENSION: May 24th
Acts 1:15-26; John 17:11b-19

Acts 1:15-26

There are two very important themes in today's readings which are the final picture in place before we celebrate the great feast of Pentecost. The first is the replacement of Judas.

For Luke, his faith community and the early believers their links back to Jesus were very much seen in terms of their relationship to him through the Twelve – the apostles who had been called and placed into their ministries by the Lord himself. The problem was, that with the betrayal of Jesus, that link had been broken. One of the Twelve, of those chosen and authorized by Jesus to go out and preach the Gospel and to heal and to exercise his divine rule over the twelve tribes of Israel had been turned by Satan and had betrayed the Son of Man. We know from reading Luke's Gospel that there was great significance for him in the number twelve and its links to the twelve tribes of Israel and his faith community's connections back to the promises made to Israel. He gathered the nucleus of the new Israel around him and chose these men to take over leadership of the people of God in his absence.

This is why the betrayal by Judas had to be addressed and authority once more established over Israel. What Jesus does is no more than he promised. He told his followers that he would return again and strengthen those who were to continue his mission and ministry in creation and that is what he is doing – in the person of Peter. This is the same Peter who denied him earlier but unlike Judas, he had repented and had been restored. Now he is the conduit through which the power of Jesus is at work.

This was such an important point for Luke's community. They are not left leaderless. Yes, Jesus has risen and ascended but he is still leading them, guiding them, feeding them and correcting them in the person of the apostles and their successors. This is why the Church has always honoured and respected those who stand in the line of the Twelve, the Bishops, for they are the ones called and chosen by Jesus himself to have authority over the children of God. Yes, they may be sinners and are as weak and fallen as anyone else in the Body of Christ. Their sins, however, do not stop the work of the Spirit of God that is at work in them and through them. This was as true for the Church of Luke's time as it is for us today.

Judas, of course was different. He ran away from his apostolic office when things became too difficult for him, as he saw the opposition of the Pharisees and the priests building. As he weakened he saw more and more opportunities for himself and his own advancement and ended up betraying the Messiah of Israel for a handful of coins. But his apostasy and subsequent suicide left the Church with a unique problem that had to be resolved. The Spirit was to be given to the New Israel and this New Israel was incomplete with only eleven of the twelve being in place. Once the Spirit had been given to the Church, there would be no need to keep the original Twelve going. They would be replaced by their successors the Bishops but before that happened, the Lord had to raise up a symbolic Twelve, the restored Israel, the Church.

He shows Judas as one who is the opposite of discipleship. While the disciple is one who is called to go and sell all that they have, Luke presents us with a Judas who takes his blood money and buys himself a farm. Judas is different from the others because he has purchased something for himself. The Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head but Judas the betrayer had his own farm! But the farm does him no good because he kills himself and the land is left vacant. As is his place in the circle of the Twelve. Luke interprets all of this by his use of the Hebrew Scriptures and brings the reader to the point where a substitute has to be found so that circle can be complete.

And so we have the second important theme for Luke: the authority of the Twelve. Apostolic Succession, the line of Bishops symbolically going back to the original Apostles is not just about authority. It is about the love of God for his people. He does not leave them abandoned but continues to work in them and through them and this authoritative presence is symbolized through the Apostles and those who later stand in their stead. The Church has always been defined as the community of faith which gathers around its Bishops and the notion of the Church without such a gathering would be absurdity. The key to a Bishop is not the man who stands in the office but the office itself. Of course it is impossible to separate the man from the office but it is never the man who is the most important part. The sinner Peter could be a great Apostle and down through the history of the Church there have been more than a few spectacularly sinful men wearing the purple. That does not lessen the power of the gift. It is given to us by God and he will continue to work through that gift until his Son returns in glory to bring all things unto himself.

John 17:11-19

This is the centre of this great prayer of Jesus and in it he is asking the Father to become the father of his disciples and to care for them. What a great prayer by God's Son! He knows that they are to live and minister in a hostile world and that they are in great need of all of the grace and power the Father can send their way.

All that Jesus is and does comes about because of his union with his Father. As the Father knows the Son so the Son knows the Father and Jesus offers to his disciples an intimate insight into this divine union. It is through their union with Jesus in the Father that the disciples will be able to go out into the increasingly threatening world and fulfil their vocations. They know this reality of the Father in their lives by joining themselves to Jesus, for to know Jesus is to know the Father.

This is what is meant by "knowing the Father's name". To know someone's name is to know all that is to be known about them, to know the deepest secrets of their very being. A name was a precious thing, something protected and revealed to very few because it was believed that if you know a man's name you had influence over him. Thus, if the Son could reveal the Father's name to his disciples, they could find their way into a life with the Father. God would no longer be separated from them.

Why is this so important? It is because the disciples are not of this world. They are separate from it even though they live in it. This does not mean that the disciples of Jesus were to be seen as setting themselves against the world, as if the world was somehow unclean and sinful. What John means here is that the disciples are not under the power of the world, that the Prince of Darkness does not have control over them. There are evil forces lining themselves up against the Son of Light and are seeking to put him to death. Satan, as he is known, is using some of the very people to whom Jesus had been sent with the Good News, who had been praying for God to send them a messiah. Now they turned on him, rejected him and will now put him to death. As they turn on Jesus so they will also turn on his disciples.

This is the world into which the Disciples are to be sent. They are not to be kept out of the world. They are not promised a life and a ministry free from persecution, hardship, pain and even death. Far from it. They are sent into the world not for their own sake but so that the name of Jesus may be glorified. It is in them and through them that the peoples of the world will give glory to God. That is quite a mission and we can see how it can shape what an individual believer might do and how a faith community might shape its actions in the world. All that they do should bring the praise of God onto the lips of those among whom they live and with whom they work. If something does not bring the praise of God to the lips of an unbelieving world then what they are doing is not discipleship!

This is why they need to be taken up into the life of the Father. It is all too easy for the disciples to be caught out by their human weakness and to follow the lead of Judas and fall into sin, abandoning the way of discipleship. Thus Jesus prays that the love of the Father will keep them from falling into sin as they minister to give glory to the name of God.

Conclusion:

Both of these writers were putting their stories down for the sake of their own separate Church communities which found themselves ministering in difficult circumstances. They were persecuted and harassed and the temptation must have been there to give up, to see that the trials were too difficult and the threat of death all too real. How on earth could the ordinary man and woman of faith continue to believe? Both authors are saying that they cannot! At least, not without the grace of God within them

For Luke it was by the individual believer placing himself or herself within the circle of believers, within the Church gathered together around the successors of the Apostles that they could tap into the ongoing headship of Christ in the world. God had never abandoned his people and he never would. With John he believed that the Father poured out an abundance of blessings onto his children but those gifts were obtained only through the union within the Body of Christ. The only way to know the Father was to know the Son and to know the Son was to attach oneself to the living vine that was his body.

Both writers also understood clearly that the only work of this New Israel, this new People of God, was to give God glory. They were to live in Truth, were to live lives of holiness, so that the peoples of the world would fall to their knees before the living God. To live in any other way, for any other purpose was to live in sin. And so both of their Church shaped themselves and their way of life according to the will of God rather than according to the will of the world.

Today it is no different. We too understand our Church to be the people of God gathered around their Bishop to continue the work of the Son in our world. We too face enormous difficulties and challenges and at times go through periods of persecution and hardship. We know the temptation to give up, to compromise and live lukewarm lives of faith. These are not new. But we also know that in Jesus we share the divine life of the Father and that the more we live in the Father's love, the more our own lives will be enriched and blessed. As a Church we face many difficulties, even struggling to survive into the future. Life has not been this hard for Christ's disciples in a long, long time. But hard as it may be, we are buoyed up by knowing that we are never abandoned in our struggles, that God is with us in his Son and that if we remain faithful to him, he will remain faithful to us. With the promised Holy Spirit coming upon the Church at Pentecost, things never looked so good.