

Between the Ascension and Pentecost

Littlebourne - 29th May 2022 - Acts 1:12-26

Last week we saw Jesus ascend into heaven and next week we'll see Pentecost. This week we're looking at those 10 days between the ascension and Pentecost.

v12-14

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. 14 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

After Jesus has left them, they go back to Jerusalem, to the upper room. Where they were, the Mount Olivet, was where Jesus predicted the future - his future return, where he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and where he lastly ascended as we saw last week. You'll remember that a Sabbath's day journey was about 3/4 mile.

We see something of a mirror of some of the events of the crucifixion. Where in Mark we read that they met in the upper room, then headed for Mount Olivet and then were separated from Jesus, now in Acts, the same thing happens in reverse. Jesus separates from them, physically, then they return from Mount Olivet to the upper room in Jerusalem.

We don't know if it's the same upper room as the passover - it's probably somewhere near the temple courts where the crowds would be, as we'll see at Pentecost next week. It's also presumably a fairly large place, because we see that there are 120 in the group.

[[I guess you could take 120 as either a large or a small figure? It's a fair amount of people, but on the other hand, it's maybe not as many as we'd expect if Jesus has been showing himself resurrected?]]

We have the list of the remaining 11 close disciples of Jesus, the Apostles as they are now referred to. We saw this way back in Mark 3 as well, just over a year ago, and at the time I commented that these men are better known now than many of the most powerful people of their day. Yet they are all pretty ordinary people. Until they met Jesus, they had no particular theological education beyond that of the average Jewish man. Now, after a few years with Jesus, they are about ready to spread the message of Christ to the ends of their known world. But before they do that, they are in the upper room praying together.

v15-20

15 In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, 16 “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. 17 For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

18 (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. 19 And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 “For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

*“May his camp become desolate,
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;*

and

“Let another take his office.’

Now we see that Peter stands up amongst the whole lot of them and explains from scripture what he sees has happened with Judas. Peter argues that scripture has been fulfilled in Judas betraying Jesus, that he was a part of the group properly, and that he should be replaced.

First, let's examine the prophecy and scriptural argument of Peter. Peter quotes two Psalms, both written by David.

The first quote is from Psalm 69 (verse 25). David in this Psalm is talking about how he is in trouble and he's praying that God would deliver him and that his enemies would be brought to justice.

Similarly, the second quote from Peter is from Psalm 109 (verse 8). This Psalm is an imprecatory Psalm - a Psalm that calls out to God to curse his enemies. Not maybe the sort of Psalm we typically like to read today.

Another occasion where Judas is said to be prophesied in scripture is in John 13 (verse 18). In that passage, Jesus is talking and says (John 13:17-19):

17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. 18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' 19 I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he.

The scripture referred to is Psalm 41 (verse 9). In that Psalm, David is again facing trouble and calls on the Lord, he admits his sin and seeks justice for his enemies.

It's thought that Psalm 41 could be from a time where David was being opposed by his son, Absalom. The similarity to Judas is in the person of Ahitophel.

Ahitophel was one of David's close advisers, known for his wisdom. But he betrays David and supports Absalom's attempts to take the throne. When, after his advice is not heeded, the conspiracy is on its last legs and sees no way out, he returns to his home town, sets his affairs in order and hangs himself.

The similarity to Judas has been noted through the centuries - the betrayal and suicide of one of the Kings inner circle. You can read all about the events in 2 Samuel 15-17.

Next, let's tackle the aside that Luke includes about Judas' death. Matthew records the circumstances of Judas' death in Matthew chapter 27 (verse 3-10):

3 Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." 5 And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. 6 But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." 7 So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. 8 Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, 10 and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

The first thing we might notice is that in Matthew's account, it's clearly the priests that bought the field. In Acts, the implication is that Judas bought it. In Matthew, the implication is that because it was bought with blood money, that it's called the field of blood, in Acts, the implication is maybe that the gory end of Judas was the cause. We also have a strange comment that Judas either 'fell headlong' or 'swelled up' depending on translation. What's going on?

The usual explanation is that the priests really did buy the field, and it was where Judas committed suicide too. There is a sense in which Judas is the cause of the buying of the field - it's his blood money that bought it, it would never have been bought had Judas not betrayed Jesus. When he committed suicide, he either was left hanging a long time, such that he swelled up, decomposed and burst open, or that maybe the rope snapped and his corpse fell and split open. Both events - the death and buying with blood money contribute to the field's naming. There are alternative theories involving multiple fields, but the common explanation makes sense to me.

Now, let's look at why it was that Peter thought Judas should be replaced. Peter states that Judas was, in the words of the ESV, "allotted his share in the ministry".

Maybe what was going through Peter's mind was the words of Jesus from, for example, Matthew 19 (verse 28):

28 Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Was Peter considering that this was to be taken literally - that there needed to be twelve of them? Was eleven not enough? I don't know, but Peter thought it was necessary, and backs this up with his reference to Psalm 109 - "Let another take his office."

v21-26

21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." 23 And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Now Peter gives the qualifications for this man to be listed among the twelve. It has to be one that has been with them all the while they have been with Jesus - even since the start of Jesus' ministry. He must also join them in being a witness to the resurrection.

They put forward two men. It might be that these two are the only two people that qualified - they may have been the only men to have stayed the course as long as the other eleven did. Or it may have been that these two in particular were the best candidates of the pool available, closest to the qualification or best in terms of character.

The important thing is that they had a standard to work against. Being an apostle was something that meant a real experience of the earthly ministry of Christ.

The title apostle means 'one sent out'. It's a complicated title, because it is used in several different contexts for different people. First, we have the twelve apostles - here it's the remaining eleven plus Matthias. The twelve are special people in the gospels and then beyond, into the later first century. They were specifically chosen from a wider group of Jesus' followers, they are the true apostles, commissioned to go and be witnesses, sent by Jesus. We saw that last week.

Then others are referred to as apostles. Acts 14 (verse 13-15):

3 And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, 15 "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

Paul is frequently referred to as an apostle, but he was not one of the twelve. Romans 1:1, Paul refers to himself as being 'called to be an apostle'. The emphasis on apostleship is in being divinely appointed and sent - the original twelve chosen by Jesus personally, Paul's Damascus road experience as he sees Christ and now here, the eleven seek God's wisdom in appointing a twelfth.

Twelve apostles for the twelve tribes of Israel, and one more for the gentiles, who are a sort of thirteenth tribe.

Now to complicate things further, Jesus is referred to as an apostle as well - Hebrews 3:1:

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession

Jesus was one sent - the Father sent him.

Apostle, with a capital A, as a title is something I think probably limited to the first century, to the first generation of Christians. There's something special about the particular way in which those who held that title were given great wisdom and ability and empowerment in spreading the gospel. When we hear someone say today that they are an apostle, we should be very wary - it's not a title to be taken lightly.

Now on the other hand, we all find ourselves in situations where we have the opportunity to be like these apostles of old - to witness of our experience of Christ. To the extent that God sends us to be his witnesses, we are effectively doing the work of apostles. Not capital A apostles like the twelve here, but human just like them and empowered by Holy Spirit to some degree just like them. Next week, as the power of the Holy Spirit falls upon them, it's not just the twelve that are affected, it's all the gathering.

So to finish our passage, how then did they choose between the two men? First, they prayed. Before they could choose, they prayed about it.

"You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, 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."

They pray, that God's will be done - that he would guide them in their choice.

Then they do something maybe unexpected - it's the only instance of this in the New Testament I think, they cast lots and choose effectively at random. Now it's not random in the sense that they trusted God to grant the right outcome, but it's maybe not the most 'holy' method of choosing, is it?

I think this illustrates for us a viable way of making decisions - first, we have God given intelligence. We can use our common sense, as the apostles did, to choose things. Some choices are obvious, so sometimes that's as far as we get.

Next, they prayed. If the answer isn't so obvious, or the stakes are high, or really for any reason, praying is the next step. God may make it obvious to us then what the answer is, or he might not. But to pray is never a bad choice to make.

Lastly, we see that the apostles, who presumably couldn't decide between the two themselves, didn't just give up. They weren't endlessly indecisive. They made a choice and got on with things, even a choice at random. They trusted that God would make the best of the situation, even guide it in ways they couldn't see.

So to pick, they cast lots. They picked at random. At first glance, we probably find this a bit odd - maybe somewhat profane. It doesn't seem like the sort of neat decision with God's clear guidance that we see in other parts of Acts. In Acts, people do things often because the Holy Spirit tells them to. Nice and direct, not like this.

Well there's a possible similarity in the Old Testament. In Exodus 28 (verse 30) we read of the 'Urim and Thummim' which are placed on the breastplate that the high priest wears. We're not told what exactly these are, but they are used as objects of divination - they are to determine God's will in a situation. Some think that these are a similar thing to casting lots, rolling dice, that sort of choosing apparently at random, but with the assurance that God is behind the decision made with these. The actual decisions that arise from the use of the Urim and Thummim are sometimes quite complex though, so it's not clear whether they were this simple. Ultimately, we don't know exactly what the Urim and Thummim were, and maybe that's for the best - to attempt to replicate them for today would likely be sinful sorcery than anything good.

What we see in Acts is a bit different I think - it's that they had a choice of two very close options and just had to pick one. They weren't seeking anything more complex than that. Either choice would have been good - they've narrowed down their options properly and now are just picking someone so they can get on with things. This is our model, to be decisive.

[[If you can't pick something from the menu, you won't eat.]]

We never hear of either Matthias or Joseph, the two candidates for apostleship ever again. Much like some of the other apostles, their names are recorded, but their deeds are not. No doubt, they did important and powerful work, but we are left in the dark as to what that was.

Conclusion

1 Kings 18:21, running up to the showdown between God and Elijah on one side and Baal and his priests on the other:

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word.

Now for these Israelites looking on, we look at this and think "isn't it obvious"? These are people that have been delivered from slavery in Egypt, they've defeated their enemies miraculously, no end of tales of how the living God has been with them, but still they're wary to commit.

They want to hedge their bets, they want to keep their options open before they see who's going to win. Before they picked a God to worship, they in effect worshipped another - the god of open options, the god of non-commitment.

Today, people like to do the same - for example, there are those people that describe themselves as 'spiritual'. They are interested in spiritual things, they are interested in different religions, but they do their best to never actually pick one and commit to it. It's so much more freeing to float between them and just loosely hold the bits you like from each, for as long as they suit you.

But not choosing is a choice. When we worship the god of open options, the false promise is freedom - freedom from responsibilities, freedom from serving anything else. We've all I'm sure experienced situations where to choose meant taking responsibility for a choice, and bearing the cost of that choice, but doing nothing is a way to avoid the consequences.

Now it's important to choose wisely - the apostles as we've seen did not make a rash decision, they had criteria, they prayed, they narrowed things down. But they did decide. They paused and considered, certainly, but they didn't procrastinate. There's a point at which not choosing becomes idolatry - it becomes lack of trust in God who ordains the decisions we make and works all things for our good and His glory.

Ephesians 1:4:

■ *He chose us in him before the creation of the world.*

2 Thessalonians 2:13:

■ *God chose you . . . to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit*

If our God were as fond of keeping his options open as we are, we'd be in big trouble.

Jesus said, "You cannot serve two masters." We all must choose who we will follow, and to choose the god of open options is to reject the triune God, the one who deliberately closed off his options in order to save your life. Nothing narrows your options more than giving yourself up to crucifixion.

So choose the infinite God who chose to limit himself to a lowly life on earth. Choose the God who committed to a path of great suffering, so he could pursue us. Choose the narrow way that leads to life.