

## 7 EASTER – ST NICOLAS’S, ABINGDON

12 May 2024



Acts 1.15–17, 21–26 / 1 John 5.9–13 / John 17.6–19

Show which one of these... you have chosen.



In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

AS YOU MAY KNOW, I recently spent a long-ish while as a job-seeker. Thank heaven, the Parish of Abingdon picked me off the shelf dusted me off, and decided I would do well enough as your Associate Priest, but that came *after* many other institutions discerned that other candidates suited them more. Which is a roundabout way of indicating that this morning’s lesson from the Acts of the Apostles sounds a bit different when you hear it from Joseph Barsabbas’s perspective. ‘One of these fellas who has been with us, going in and out with Jesus from when John baptised him right to the Ascension, has to take Judas’s place.’ The apostles short-listed Joseph and Matthias: both fully qualified, both had experienced life as disciples of Jesus. ‘And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.’ St Luke doesn’t even acknowledge that Joseph missed out — from now on, even Matthias hardly gets a look-in, and Joseph disappears almost entirely from our knowledge of church history.

If the apostles had placed an advert in *Church Times*, what would it have said? In the ‘essential’ category, as we’ve already heard, they would count in-person familiarity with Jesus and his gospel over the whole duration of Jesus’s ministry. In the ‘desirable’ category, they might use some of the language we heard in the lesson from St John. Any candidate should be someone who *keeps Jesus’s words*, that they *know in truth*

*that Jesus came from God, and believes that God sent him.* (Those are key motifs in John's Gospel — Where is he *from*? Who *sent* him? — so there's no need to apply if you think Jesus simply came from Galilee, or that he was sent by an ordinary human source.) If you desire this unique position, your life should itself give glory to God. You should be manifestly in unity and love with your colleagues in this movement. If you would be our vicar, show us that you have been sanctified in truth, and help us grow in holiness.

We don't know enough about Joseph Barsabbas to know the extent to which he exemplified the qualities Jesus urges on us in his farewell speech to the Twelve — but he would have been holy enough to make the short list, selected by saints who had known him all through Jesus's ministry. Indeed, the story implies that Barsabbas and Matthias were in a virtual dead heat of holiness; otherwise, why would they have needed to cast lots? You don't usually flip a coin between a splendid, joyous opportunity and a harmful, miserable one.

Faced with two equally strong candidates for the vacant post as the Twelfth Apostle, Peter *et al.* prayed, and flipped the coin, and... And at this point, before the coin descends to the Pontifical palm for Peter to slap onto his wrist and reveal the selection, we ought to remember that casting lots — drawing straws, rolling dice, various other means of random distribution — has a long history in the Bible. In fact, part of the High Priest's job involved taking care of, and using, Urim and Thummim. The details of Urim and Thummim were forgotten long ago, so long ago that it's not even clear that the biblical authors knew what they were or how they worked. If we read the relevant passages though, it seems that Urim and Thummim were some sort of lot-casting apparatus, whose function was specifically to *remove* important decisions from the control of potentially corruptible human agency. A

random result would be better than just assuming high priest was playing fair, and (of course) the premise was that the result wasn't random at all, that God would control the dice, or the straws, or the coin, or whatever, so that the divinely-favoured choice would come up.

The disappointed job-seeker hears the story of Joseph and can't help thinking how arbitrary, how heart-breaking the coin-flip method of identifying *whom* the search committee calls, and who vanishes from sight, how painful it all sounds. But at the same time, that arbitrariness tells the unpalatable truth about the world and its ways. We like to find patterns, regularities, predictability in daily life — but contingencies beset us at every turn. We *control* much less than we'd like, however carefully we plan. Joseph Barsabbas may have presented sterling credentials to Peter and the rest, but the lot fell on Matthias. From that moment on, Matthias became one of the *apostles*, *Saint Matthias*, a major feast day on the Church's calendar; from that moment on, Joseph Barsabbas, *possibly* (not likely) later known as Bishop Justus of Eleutheropolis, became one of those optional observances that only the most enthusiastic venerators observes. And if Barsabbas *didn't* become a bishop (*he probably didn't*), then we lose sight of him altogether.

As I said, one element in choosing apostles by casting lots involves protecting us against bias, and another takes the *outcome* of a random process as a sign of God's will, God's choice. Perhaps, though, there's less difference than we usually suppose between God's will and randomness. *Everything* looks inexplicable, looks chaotic, until we know enough about it to recognise the patterns at work. And mortal minds will not, *cannot* know the mind of God. When we say 'There's a reason for your suffering', or 'It's part of God's plan', we *seem* to be saying 'This is an intelligible aspect of what you or I might work out if we were setting agendas for how the world works.' But most of us have a

challenging time just managing our *own* lives, and even then we have to do a lot of improvisation to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. We don't know *nearly* enough to manage such complex systems as — you know — *the whole cosmos*. Fortunately for me, I don't have to remember to inhale every few seconds, to make my heart beat regularly; otherwise I wouldn't be standing here today. How much less could I *presume* to *begin* to *imagine* what it would be like to plan whom the apostles would elect as successor to Judas, who enjoys that good luck, and who suffers from random misfortune? But all of this discourse presumes so much more extensive an understanding of God's ways than *anybody* has attained, that we're best off refusing to think in those terms altogether. In a world where catastrophe, injustice, and evil still make their maleficent influence felt, God sent Jesus — a human, innocent, *good* emissary — among us to *suffer* catastrophe, injustice, and evil, and *in solidarity with us* to endure them, to rise above them, and ultimately to ascend, to *transcend* them in the very solidarity he shares with us.

After eighteen or twenty months of discouragement and, to be honest, some dents to my vanity, I have been *blessed* that the lot fell on me here at St Nic's, here in Abingdon Parish. Here I will try to shape my life to give glory to God, to grow manifestly in unity and love with my colleagues, to live as one who has been sanctified in truth, to help us all grow in holiness. Still, I'd never, *never* have forecast this outcome at the beginning of my search. Joseph Barsabbas should have been my guide: we learn his name and see his qualifications, and then... he humbly steps back into the obscurity from which he emerged, but a recipient (as we all are) of that greatest gift, the eternal life promised us in name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —

**Amen**

Acts 1:15 ¶ In those days Peter stood up among the believers<sup>a</sup> (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, “Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us 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.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles..

1 John 5:9 If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God<sup>a</sup> have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

¶ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I

have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth..

All the books about 'Best Leadership Practices' disapprove of making decisions by flipping coins, but imagine how it might feel if you always were on the losing side of decisions, you're the sixth political party in a system that overwhelmingly favours the two largest parties. Imagine the Team Rector dressed in glorious raiments with a linen robe, wearing a splendid breastplate, from which he pulls the Holy Bundle of Straws, and *at last!* draws the straw for your party.