

**18.5.2017 St John with St Mark, Bury
St Matthias. Acts 1:15-26. John 15:9-17.**

We've just heard the story as to how the first disciples replaced Judas Iscariot. Iscariot had betrayed Jesus and had died, some say he committed suicide. There was the need to have a twelfth disciple. The disciples believed that they should follow the pattern of Israel in having twelve tribes. So Matthias was chosen by lot. There were no job applications, no forms, no interviews, no references, just that Matthias had been with Jesus from the beginning and that Matthias was somehow suitable. And he is then chosen by lot.

In this process there is great trust upon the ways of God. It is God's ways, not human ways that matter. And yet there is a profound vulnerability of God here. God opts to use the human methods of choice put before the Eternal. It could all go wrong.

But this is like the story of the incarnation itself. Luke, the author of Luke and Acts, places the birth, life and death and resurrection of Jesus clearly within human history. He dates the birth of Jesus by reference to Roman governors (Quirinius) and a census. It matters to Luke to know who was governing the parts of Palestine, how long the Roman emperor had ruled and that Pilate was now governor as John the Baptist begins to preach and Jesus is baptised by John. The word is truly made flesh and falls within human history. God cannot control or foresee how Jesus will make out. At best there is one man working with God...in theory. God is taking the risk of faith that we might take the risk of faith.

Choosing Matthias by lot is just another leap into the dark for God, who must trust that human ways actually work.

We have absolutely no idea how Matthias worked out as an apostle. All we know of him is this story. The rest is an absolute blank. We have no real idea as to what Matthias did before his election, except that he was with Jesus. Then we have no idea as to what Matthias did after his election. There is nothing in the Bible, nothing in Tradition and nothing in reason. Matthias is a blank.

But his method of selection is maintained. There is the Coptic church, I think the Egyptian Copts, who, when choosing their pope, select three likely people and then draw lots. So Pope Shenouda III was chosen by lot. This is magnificent. This really is risking everything on the ways of God.

We have systems of appraisal and interview to select a vicar, a bishop. Even archdeacons are appraised. We think that this scientifically and infallibly produces the right answer. What it actually does is to weed out eccentrics, visionaries, poets, prosodists and the artists of the Spirit that provide soul for the Church. We actually reproduce the same bureaucrats as those who do the selecting. What is worse is that we deliberately seek out the manager rather than the theologian. This is clearly seen in the quality of theological ability on the bench of bishops. We have no one, not one person of the calibre of David Jenkins, one time bishop of Durham, nor a Rowan Williams, one time archbishop of Canterbury. I do not know of a single reasonable poet on the Episcopal bench, and what most bishops write seems to be pious nonsense at best. This is a lamentable state of affairs.

We need to open our doors again to the eccentric, to the visionary, the poet, prosodist, artist of the Spirit that we might regain our souls. If that means drawing lots – so be it. Amen.