



Sermon
20th May, 2012

Being a true follower of Jesus

Acts 1:15-2:1; John 17:6-13; 1 John 5:6-13

© 2012 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

You know the progression – Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost – Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit. After the resurrection, Jesus remained for forty days during which he appeared to Peter, the other apostles, and even to more than 500 disciples simultaneously. At the end of that period, he commissioned them to evangelise and ascended from their sight. He instructed them to wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Some ten days later on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, gave them boldness and launched them into ministry.

There was, however, a matter that they needed to deal with. We don't normally address this, but it has struck me strongly as I have read the scriptures for today.

After the Ascension, they were to wait and pray until the promise of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled. But they did something else as well. Jesus had appointed twelve apostles but now there were eleven because Judas was dead. The number of apostles needed to be restored. This term "apostle" is significant because it was a delegate or ambassador sent with a message and carrying the full authority of the sender. Jesus said to them, they were to be his witnesses to all the world. These apostles were witnesses in a higher sense than the rest of us. They had been physically present with Jesus through his ministry. They were commissioned by him. They saw him in the resurrection body. They experienced the first great outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

In the gospel passage, which is part of Jesus' prayer after the Last Supper, he says about the Apostles that he had given revelation to them and they had believed him. They had obeyed. They had believed with certainty that he was sent by God the Father.

If we are Christians, we are also commissioned to be his witnesses. We have not seen his ministry on earth, but we are given an inner witness of the truth

and reality of those events by the Holy Spirit, whom we too have received. Two weeks ago, I talked about Philip talking to the Ethiopian and talking about Jesus rather than the weather. I gave some examples like sweeping the leaves and someone asking about the church building or helping with morning tea and talking to someone afterwards and taking the leads that come. I suggested we might pray the “Use Me” prayer again. Last week after that, I was talking to one of the tradesmen who was here to fix some faults. He suddenly volunteered that he would encourage his wife to come to our church because faith was important to her – although he didn’t believe in God. I was able to encourage the idea of a visit and suggest he might find there was more to the idea of God than he now thinks, added a plug for Alpha and threw in the fact that I had once not believed there was a God as well. It felt OK, about the right amount not to overdo a small interest but hopefully help him think some more. I wonder if any of you have had equivalent experiences?

It is important that the full complement of witnesses be re-established for the first development of the early church. Furthermore, Jesus himself had said the disciples who were twelve would have a kingdom and they would sit on thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel¹. So there was a precedent to think there needed to be twelve apostles. The one they chose would need to be able to speak with the same confidence as a witness, so he needed to have been with them from the baptism until the ascension.

The account in Acts, continues with the reading we had today. Somewhere in those ten days between Ascension and Pentecost, Peter urged the group of believers to appoint a replacement apostle. He reviewed the reason they needed to do this. Judas had betrayed Jesus for money. He had now died. He cites quotations from Psalms 69 & 109 which he understands to speak of Judas and his actions.

Jesus explained to them after his resurrection how the Old Testament scriptures applied to him. There are a number of occasions where Peter is clearly drawing on these insights in his preaching. Quite possibly, this is such an occasion. The New Testament applies Psalm 69 to Jesus five times. In it, an innocent sufferer tells of his zeal for God’s house and being persecuted by enemies.

Prophetic prediction does not necessarily mean it is God’s will. We understand God to be outside time. It is quite reasonable to understand that God can view all time and so know what will happen without needing to will those events himself. From our more limited perspective, inside time, you can make a prediction of likely consequence of events without that meaning you wish those things to happen.

Not only does Peter find reference to Judas’ betrayal in the Psalms but also the prescription to appoint another in Psalm 109. So the company chose two of

¹ Luke 22:28-30

those who had been close followers of Jesus and then they prayed for the Lord to make the selection and cast lots. This was a standard Old Testament means of discerning God's will. Indeed it was part of the High Priest's role to use the Urim and Thurim in discerning God's leading. This, however, is the last time the technique is mentioned – for once the Holy Spirit had come it was no longer a valid means of decision making. Now the source of wisdom is indwelling and God's gifts of wisdom, discernment and prophecy are freely available to the church – if we will but use them.

I'd like to return though to Judas. He was a follower of Jesus yet he betrayed Jesus. In the end he was not a true follower of Jesus. We are followers of Jesus – how can we be sure that we are true followers?

There is quite a fashion for excusing Judas – even making him the poor victim of the plot. However, the New Testament which was written by eye-witnesses is not sympathetic. Before people jump to the conclusion this was a vindictive attitude of the other apostles – remember that they like us were taught to forgive. If we are able to make allowances for Judas, could they not have done too? Do we assume we are so much better at this forgiving game?

What we see as we review mentions of him through the gospels is that from the beginning, Jesus hinted that one would betray him. That doesn't mean he necessarily knew which one, the scriptures would warn him that he would be betrayed by someone close. For example, "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me."² Later he referred to that verse during the Last Supper when he indicated it was Judas.

So Judas responded to the call to follow Jesus. He was with him and the others for the three years. He was certainly a follower physically. But something was wrong. We first get an inkling of trouble when Judas criticises Mary for pouring out the jar of anointing oil to honour Jesus. He sourly remarks it is a waste and it would be better to sell it and give the money to the poor. Mary has just received her brother back from the dead and come to the understanding that Jesus truly is divine and she honours him with probably the most expensive thing she has. But Judas' heart was not in tune with such devotion. He was not honouring Jesus extravagantly. Then the gospel adds the observation that Judas was a thief and as keeper of the common purse used to help himself to the money.

Here then is a persistent sin, indulged in right alongside Jesus, when Jesus had entrusted him with their funds. That is pretty blatant!

Whether or not he knew precisely which of his disciples would betray earlier, by the Last Supper, Jesus does know. Even at this stage, it appears to me he is trying to reach him. When he says that one of them will betray him, John asks

² Psalm 41:9

him quietly who it is³. Jesus tells him it is the man to whom he will give the piece of bread. Then he dipped it and gave it to Judas. Even this was a gesture of peace – at the Passover meal the head of the dinner would honour someone present by this action. At this late stage, it seems Jesus honoured Judas, trying yet again to reach him. But it was to no avail, Judas had determined on his course of action. He left the gathering.

Soon after this, Jesus prays the prayer we heard and says,

“While I was with them, I protected them [his followers] and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction [literally, ‘son of perdition’] so that Scripture would be fulfilled.”⁴

Of that expression “son of perdition” the NIV Bible Commentary says, “This Semitic phrase denotes an abandoned character, one utterly lost and given over to evil. The language does not imply that Judas was a helpless victim who was destined to perdition against his will. Rather it implies that, having made his decision, he had passed the point of no return; and by so doing, he carried out what the Scriptures had indicated would happen.”⁵

So what we see is a man who was going through the form of following Jesus but not from his heart. So too our following of him, needs to be more than the form - more than going to church, there needs to be the heart engagement and loyalty too. There needs to be the change of heart which Jesus calls being born again. It is a new life in the old shell. It was lacking in Judas.

That naturally brings us to the question of being sure we are saved. John addresses that in his epistle. He said he wrote so that we may know we have eternal life.

In the passage we read, John speaks of the testimony or evidence we have that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. We examined this together once before. When he speaks of the water and the blood, the generally held understanding is that he means the baptism and death of Jesus. At the baptism and before the crucifixion, God spoke audibly from heaven affirming Jesus as his Son. There we have the testimony of God himself. We can add to that the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

In verse 11, John continues by explaining the testimony: It is that God has given us eternal life and that life is in his Son. In you have Jesus, you have life, because Jesus **is** the Life, he **is** eternal life. If you believe the testimony of God - if you trust in Jesus as the Son of God and the one able to save you, then you have the life you seek.

³ John 13:21-30

⁴ John 17:12

⁵ Barker K.L. & Kohlenberger J., 1994, The NIV Bible Commentary, Hodder & Stoughton, London; page 357

Jesus is the only true God and he is eternal life. Is that your conviction? I pray that it is.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.