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## Sermon

Being a true follower of Jesus

**Acts 1:15-17,21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19**

16<sup>th</sup> May 2021

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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 instructed them to wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit, commissioned them to evangelise and ascended from their sight.

Forty days after Easter was last Thursday when we celebrated the Ascension. Ten more days will be next Sunday – Pentecost.

After the Ascension there was a matter that they needed to deal with. Jesus had appointed twelve apostles but 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 had been physically present with Jesus through his ministry. They were commissioned by him. They saw him in the resurrection body. 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.

It is important that the full complement of witnesses be re-established for the first development of the early church. 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 Israel<sup>1</sup>. 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 cited quotations from Psalms 69 & 109 which he applied to Judas and his actions.

Not only does Peter find reference to Judas’ betrayal in the Psalms but also the prescription to appoint another in Psalm 109. He quoted from Psalm 69:25-28

May their place be deserted; let there be no-one to dwell in their tents. For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 22:28-30

And also from Psalm 109:2-8

... wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me; they have spoken against me with lying tongues. With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause. In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer. They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship. ... May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership.

So the disciples chose two of those who had been close followers of Jesus and then they prayed for the Lord to make the selection as they cast lots.

When they prayed they said, "you know everyone's heart." That is a single word: *kardiagnostes* – 'heart-knower.' He knows our hearts. Do you wonder if you are understood? God is *kardia-nostes* he is the heart-knower. Take comfort from that, he knows your heart and he loves you.

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 victim of the plot. However, his fellows of the time did not see it that way. 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?

Jesus had 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."<sup>2</sup> Later he referred to that verse during the Last Supper when he indicated it was Judas.

Judas had responded to the call to follow Jesus. He was with him and the disciples for three years. But something was wrong. We first get an inkling of trouble when Judas criticised Mary for pouring out the jar of anointing oil to honour Jesus. He sourly remarked it is a waste and it would be better to sell it and give the money to the poor. Mary had just received her brother back from the dead and had come to the understanding that Jesus truly is divine – so she honoured him with the most precious thing she had. 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 did know. Even at that stage, he was trying to reach him. When he said one of them would betray him, John asked him quietly who it was<sup>3</sup>. Jesus told him it was the man to whom he would give the piece of bread. Then he dipped it and gave it to Judas. This itself was a gesture of peace – at the Passover meal the head of the dinner would honour someone by this action. Even at that late stage, Jesus honoured Judas, still trying to reach him. But to no avail - Judas was determined on his course of action. He left the gathering.

Soon after this, Jesus prayed the prayer we heard,

"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 so that Scripture would be fulfilled."<sup>4</sup>

The one doomed to destruction is literally "the 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

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 41:9

<sup>3</sup> John 13:21-30

<sup>4</sup> John 17:12

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.”<sup>5</sup>

We see is a man who was going through the form of following Jesus but not from his heart. We would do well to take care that our following of him is 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. That 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. 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. If we are Christians, we are given an inner witness of the truth and reality of those events by the Holy Spirit, whom we too have received. That’s what Peter meant when he said in Acts 5:32 that the Holy Spirit (who is given to believers) is a witness to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

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. If 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.

Finally in verse 20, John writes: “Jesus is the only true God and he is eternal life.” Is that your conviction? I pray that it is.

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

