

“I have chosen you” - a sermon preached by Prebendary Nigel Guthrie at St David’s and St Michael and All Angels, Exeter 13th May 2018 Easter 7

I wonder if you’ve ever felt that you have been chosen for a particular task; whether it’s a new role at work, or a job within the family or perhaps a significant responsibility within the church? If you have been chosen you will know that it’s not always a comfortable feeling. You might have asked yourself ‘Am I really the one for this? Why am I any better qualified than anyone else?’

I wonder how Matthias felt when he was chosen to make up the number of the twelve apostles to fill the place of Judas Iscariot? We will never know because we don’t know anything about Matthias except that, like his rival Joseph Barsabbus, he had followed Jesus right from the time of his Baptism up to his ascension. Then, after being chosen as the new apostle Matthias promptly disappears from the pages of the bible. Even church tradition has little offer us. One account has him ministering near the Caspian Sea and another suggests a ministry in Ethiopia. My geography isn’t that good so I asked Google, which suggested that the two places are nearly 4,000 kilometers apart. In other words we really don’t know what happened to Matthias!

But this year the very day after Matthias gets such an honourable mention in our Sunday readings it is his feast day, 14 May. It seems only right that we should pause to reflect on his experience of being chosen.

Firstly it’s interesting that the apostle Peter insists the choice of a successor to Judas must be made from those who had followed Jesus from the time of his Baptism right up until his ascension. In other words the person who was chosen had to be able to tell the story of Jesus with personal conviction and confidence. And Peter’s words go on to tell us exactly why another apostle was needed; it was to be a witness to the resurrection. There was no task more important to the early Christians than to tell the world about the resurrection of Jesus and the core group had to be up to number to do that most effectively. It’s a powerful reminder to us that we should be ready to tell the story of our faith when the opportunity arises and that we should tell it from our own experience.

Secondly the choice of Matthias was made after the people had prayed. It sounds rather odd to choose a new apostle by lot; but rather than entrusting this important choice to chance I think it showed that the early Christians were putting the choice entirely in the hands of God. But I’m afraid we can’t take this as recommendation to buy a lottery ticket or indeed to pray over it to get the right result!

But we should most certainly be praying about how we can discover God’s choices for us and for our lives. This attitude of seeking guidance shown by the early Christians is

very unlike how many people see their lives today. We all like to feel that we are in control and can choose which way to go in life. And with God's guidance we can make good choices, real choices about how we use our abilities, our time and our money. But that is not the whole story. You may remember a verse from last week's gospel reading from John chapter 15 'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit- fruit that will last- and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.' In our lives as Christians the critical thing is to recognise that we have been chosen by God and then seek to align ourselves with his desires for us, which are always good. For God wishes us to flourish, as his beloved child, and to bear fruit that will sustain others along the way.

If there is one thing that is certain in all this it is that we will mess it up! And this is where I find the Bible so encouraging. Because from the beginning to the end it is full of people who looked deeply for God in their lives, who recognised that they had been chosen and who then seriously messed up. Think of King David who wrecked his own reputation by sending the husband of the woman he lusted after to his death. Think of Solomon with his legendary wealth and wisdom whose heart was led astray by foreign wives and their gods. Think of Judas who had shared so much with Jesus, probably as much as Matthias, only to betray Jesus and himself. Think of Peter who denied Jesus three times and then, when he realised what he had done, wept bitterly.

Sometimes we should weep bitterly at our failures; but not too often or for too long. God has not chosen us primarily to be successful but to be faithful. He meets our failures with his forgiveness and mercy. He renews his call to us each morning to follow him and we can respond in our prayers and in our lives.

When we play or sing a piece of music we must always keep our minds on the melody ahead. We may play or sing a wrong note, but that doesn't matter. There is nothing we can do to bring the wrong note back. We can't get it back and correct it without ruining the flow of the music. We must look ahead to the next line of the melody and where it leads.

Can we think of our life with God like that? St Paul puts it wonderfully at the beginning of chapter 3 of his letter to the Colossians:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

God has chosen us for glory, just as he chose Matthias. Alleluia!