

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶ "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 -- ¹⁷ for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." ²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² 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." ²³ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Commentary

Symbols are important to biblical stories because they provide theological markers for their readers. There is hardly a more important numerical symbol in Scripture than the number twelve. The number twelve stands for Israel as God's people. The significance of twelve apostles is elevated in Acts because Luke's Jesus had placed the prospect of Israel's restoration in the hands of his apostolic successors (see Luke 22:28-30; Acts 1:6-8). In this sense, the restoration of the Apostolate to Twelve symbolizes (and is a necessary condition of) Israel's restoration. The stories of Judas's demise and Matthias's selection to replace him are related here to explain that God acts to restore the Twelve. The group's return to its full complement heralds the apostles' inspired roles as agents of God's plan to restore the "twelve tribes of Israel." Even as Judas represents unrepentant Israel who rejects the Messiah and is therefore rejected by God, Matthias, who unlike Judas was a "witness with us to his resurrection" represents a repentant Israel in whose life God's reign is present through the gift of the Spirit.

Reflection

1. The remaining disciples selected two candidates to replace Judas, prayed for discernment, and then rolled the dice to see who would be chosen. They believed God would reveal the

divine will through both prayer and the casting of lots. What methods do we use today for discerning God's will for our lives? How can we be sure the guidance we receive is really from God?

2. Peter said that the new apostle had to be someone who had been with them from the beginning of Jesus' ministry through the ascension, so that he could be a "witness of Jesus' resurrection" in order to ensure authentic testimony about Jesus. And yet Paul, who was called an apostle, had not been with them from the beginning, nor was he considered "one of the twelve." What should be the qualifications for a modern-day apostle?

1 John 5:9-13

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. ¹⁰ Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ 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.

Commentary

How does one come to accept the testimony of a witness? Anyone who has served on a jury knows the difficulties of sorting through conflicting evidence, weighing the testimony of one witness against that of another. These are matters that demand care and measured judgments. By contrast with this cautious approach, the Johannine tradition permits no room for indecision or uncertainty. Both the Gospel and the epistles rebuke those who are unable to make a decision about Jesus; *not* to believe that he is Son of God is the equivalent of open rejection. Central to the decision that must be made about Jesus is the nature of the witness offered. With the exception of those who were themselves witnesses of Jesus' teaching and ministry, of course, every Christian comes to faith by virtue of someone else's witness. Those who grow up in Christian families may never be conscious of the witness they receive, for that witness generally takes the form of example and nurture, and it occurs at such an early stage that it may not be perceived as formal witness. The Greek word for witness, *martyrion*, from which comes the English word "martyr," suggests another form of witness. The deaths of Christians for what they believe has often served as a witness, ironically turning what was intended as the church's defeat into its growth. When the Johannine tradition refers to witnessing, it does not speak of Christian homes as a witness or even of Christian martyrdom as a witness. The witness envisioned here is that of words – words of Jesus and words about Jesus. The Gospel of John even opens with the testimony of Jesus *as the Word!* "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." (John 1:1). Jesus' very existence is testimony about God.

Reflection

1. What clues do you look for when deciding whether or not someone is trustworthy? What clues do we see when we look at Jesus that help us decide if he is trustworthy?
2. According to First John, believing that Jesus' testimony about God is trustworthy is the key to eternal life. What does the promise of eternal life mean to you?

John 17:6-19

⁶ "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. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Commentary

The substance of the work God has given to Jesus, the divine Agent, is that of revelation. Just as the mysterious "I AM" is made known to Moses before beginning the task of leading Israel out of Egypt, so the divine name is disclosed by Jesus to disciples in preparation for continuing mission in the world. The words entrusted to Jesus by the Father are taught and received. Such revelation results in the establishment of a community that receives the words, knows their truth and believes that Jesus is sent by God. Neither doctrines nor structures nor programs distinguish the community, only its knowledge and belief that Jesus reveals God's name. Four petitions are offered by Jesus on behalf of the community. The dominant petition is that the community, which does not belong to the world, be protected from the evil one as it lives its distinctive life in the world. "World" does not refer to the universe or to the planet, but to the totality of life that is at odds with God, has rejected Jesus, and lives in the grips of the evil one. Being identified as the unique community that clings to the name of Jesus poses a threat to all the accepted absolutes and certitudes that determine the world's values. Security and

stability are not assured. Judas's capitulation to pressures around him illustrate what can happen. Jesus specifically prays that the Christian community not be taken out of the world, but that it be guarded by a Power not known to the world. The church's radical otherworldliness (not belonging to the world) consists precisely in this: its protection by and orientation to a name not known by the world. Whenever it neglects its other-worldliness and assumes it exists as an institution like all other institutions, it contradicts its very being. The second petition asks that the Christian community exhibit the same oneness that exists between Jesus and the Father. The third asks that God brings to fulfillment in the community Jesus' joy. The final petition is that God sanctify the church, set it apart for God's distinctive purposes. Its separateness is the gift of God, who assigns it a special role to play and who calls it to live as a community of strangers which, like its Lord, does not belong to the world.

Reflection

1. Jesus asks God to protect the disciples from division and evil and to sanctify them in the truth. What does your church need from God? What would you like Jesus to pray for you?
2. Who (or what) is the "evil one" from which the church needs protection?

Responsive Psalter

From Psalm 1

¹ Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

² **but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.**

³ They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴ **The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.**

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶ **for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.