

## Reflection for the 7th Sunday of Easter by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, marking the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. With the passing of Ascension Day, the focus of the church year shifts towards Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Yet between Ascension and Pentecost there are ten days which are focused on both corporate and individual renewal. Renewal that reaches the very depths of our being and calls us to prepare a fresh for the task of ministry - the task as Luke records Jesus describing it, of preaching the "repentance and forgiveness of sins ... in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

This idea of preparing and renewing can be seen in our readings from Acts and John's gospel.

In Acts, the disciples along with the other believers carry out a significant task during this short period - the replacement of Judas who, having betrayed Jesus then went out and hanged himself. Replacing Judas was a significant step in preparing for the start of their ministry: but why?

It was not only about making the numbers up (having a full complement of 12 apostles) it was also about the group's whole identity - their understanding of who they were and the path that lay before them.

For an organisation of any size to go forward and develop it needs a clear understanding of its identity, values, and goals. Look at some of the corporate adverts organisations put out: they are trying to get across not only a product but also a brand and organisational values that go alongside. For example Johnsons- "a family company" or Spar - "there for you"

From the outset the early church regarded itself as the new Israel, inheriting the mission of the traditional twelve tribes, to bring the nations of the world to the knowledge of God. Therefore, there needed to be twelve apostles in order to fulfil what they saw as Jesus' intention, and for their apostolic authority to be valid. So they elect Matthias by lots to replace Judas.

Luke is also keen to show not only Matthias taking Judas' place but that his election has been done properly, that Matthias has validity as an apostle - that this act of preparation and restoration was correct and legal.

How do we know this?

Often in scripture, numbers are not just there for information, as helpful as that is, but also contain meaning. In the story from Acts the number is 120. Under Jewish law it was only when a town congregation had 120 members that it could elect members to the Sanhedrin. So by quoting this number 120, Luke is saying this group had the authority, the legitimacy to act.

The election, although an important practical act in terms of preparation for ministry, was far from the only preparation needed. Important as structures are, there is also the need for individual and internal renewal and preparation.

Which bring us to our gospel where we see Jesus praying for the disciples. A prayer in which he asks that they will not be dragged away by the ways of the world. "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one."

If we are to be spiritually renewed we need to be washed clean of that which separates us from God, all that stops us fulfilling the mission and ministry to which we have been called. This idea of washing is not just some external bath but a real renewing of our very hearts and minds. As one of the prophets says - I

will give you a new heart and a new mind. I will take away your stubborn heart of stone and give you an obedient heart.”

This is not just a quick repair job, piece of tape covering up the cracks, rather a full restoration that takes time and energy. God needs to replace completely the sinful nature that each of us has with one that is obedient to his ways.

As Jeremiah puts it “Who can understand the human heart? There is nothing else so deceitful; it is too sick to be healed. For us to be renewed, becoming Christ like, we need a new spirit and a new heart - one that thinks and acts like Christ.

A transformation of that nature is not something we can do ourselves. Jesus as he prays for his disciples, is all too aware of that. It is one of the roles of the Holy Spirit to renew and transform. Each of us needs to be open to the working of the Holy Spirit. It is the spirit that turns lives upside down, at times almost beyond recognition.

As we await Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit - a time of preparation, a time of renewal for ministry - may we allow God’s spirit to move so that we can be more effective in our ministry for him. Let us allow him to renew and restore the structures of our Church where they need his touch. But let us also allow him to restore and transform our hearts that they may be like Christ’s

Let us pray.

*O Lord sprinkle me with clean water.*

*Remove from me all that has defiled me and dragged me away from you.*

*Give me O Lord a new heart and a new mind.*

*Take away all that is stubborn and give me an obedient heart.*

*Place your spirit within me that I may follow your laws and keep all the commands and faithfully witness to you. Amen*