

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year B)  
Sunday May 16th 2021

Today's first reading tells us, basically, everything that we know about St Matthias: he was one of the men who had travelled with Jesus and the apostles from the time of the Lord's baptism up until his resurrection and ascension; and he was chosen to replace Judas who, after betraying Jesus, had killed himself. Although this is not much of a biography, it does give us plenty to reflect on.

First of all, Matthias is chosen to take the place of Judas, who had betrayed Jesus. The betrayal by Judas is a very complex event. Why did he do it? Was it to steal the apostles' money? Was it to try to force Jesus into some display of fighting strength? Was it because he had grown disillusioned and tired of the mission? We do not really know, but we know that the evil one entered his soul and, for whatever reason, he was not strong enough to resist. And then, having betrayed his master, things went from bad to worse: instead of flinging himself on the Lord's mercy (which is never refused to anyone, even those who betray him), instead of weeping with remorse at the foot of the cross, he despaired and ended his own life. He began by doing something that Christians are always prone to doing: he loved his own idea of what Jesus ought to be more than he loved the real Jesus; and his own false view of what Jesus was like led him to despair rather than to repentance. It is a truly tragic story.

Judas may have been the first of Christ's followers to betray him, but he is certainly not the last. The history of the Church reveals that it is a rag-tag mix of saints and sinners; of inspirational self-sacrifice, and shocking self-promotion; of selflessness and selfishness. There is no doubt that the betrayals of those who claim to follow Christ are immensely damaging. Sometimes it is tempting to let their stories weaken our faith, to be turned off by their failures, or their deceits, or their falsehoods and manipulations. But this was not the way of the apostles. They must, themselves, have felt so betrayed by Judas: how could he? They thought they knew him, but it seems they were so wrong. They trusted him and he acted like this – can they dare to trust anyone again? All of this would be completely understandable, but they do not go down that road. Their response to discovering that someone they loved and trusted has done so much damage is quite the opposite of his despair: it makes them even more determined that they will live lives of virtue, generosity and grace. They will do all that they can to outweigh his betrayal by the depth of their own faithfulness. All of us have seen stories of ways in which Christians, sometimes people we have known and trusted and admired, have betrayed the Lord. If we are honest we will admit that, perhaps only in little ways, we have done the same ourselves. It can be very discouraging; that is part of the Devil's plan, to make us despair of the Church because of the failings of its members. The way of the apostles is a better way; rather than be discouraged by the fact that an apostle betrayed Jesus they are determined that they will try harder, will be more open to the spirit, more attentive to his word, more alert to his

presence, more faithful to his call. Betrayal and failure are damaging and hurtful and shake us; but how we choose to respond is the measure of our own faith and our own worth in a needy world.

So the choice of Matthias tells us something about the response to disappointment in those we had looked up to. But it is also a clear description of the vision of the church which the apostles had. They needed to choose someone to make the college of apostles up to twelve once more, so that when the spirit comes it is poured out onto a group that represents the twelve tribes of Israel, that can be to completeness of God's new chosen people. Who will best fulfil this role? It must be someone who is at the heart of the church. There are two qualifications: he must be someone who has travelled with the Lord's followers from the day of his baptism up until the day of his ascension; it must be someone who has lived in close friendship with him, hearing the words that he speaks and seeing the actions that he does, someone whose soul has been formed in friendship with Christ. And, secondly, it must be someone who can act together with the apostles as a witness to the resurrection. For the apostles it is very clear that the point of the church is not to huddle together in mutual support, a kind of inward-looking self-help group. The apostles are clear: to be a Christian means to live in friendship with Christ, to know him and to love him, to see and understand how he acts and to know well what he says, and as we live in friendship with him we then use that friendship as the base from which we proclaim the resurrection to the world. This is not just a matter of saying to people that the Easter story is true, it is much more significant than that: proclaiming the resurrection means bringing a message of hope into all the places where it is most needed. The world needs hope, it needs a deep knowledge that on a deep level all is well. We have that message to share, and we dare not keep it to ourselves.

In a sense this Sunday is a moment of quiet: the Lord has ascended, but the spirit has not yet come. It is a time for reflection on some important questions: how will we react to betrayal, disappointment, failure? And what is the nature of the Christian life, what is the energy that drives it – and how can we as individuals and we as a group, a parish, the local family of believers, bring that to life?