

Third Sunday service, 16 May 2021

Talk: Building the church

John 17: 6-19 and Acts 1: 15-17, 21-end

We're nearly at the end of Eastertide now and Pentecost is just around the corner, and today's readings show the disciples start to change from being Jesus's followers into being his church. We see them grapple with what it means to be a member of their group and what it means to become a leader.

Last Thursday, for us, was Ascension Day, and our story in Acts comes shortly after this, the last of Jesus's appearances to His followers after the crucifixion. Jesus had appeared to them over a period of 40 days, repeatedly, until this last time when he disappeared into heaven with the promise that they'd receive power from God and become witnesses to the whole world.

The followers are now living together in Jerusalem, devoting themselves to constant prayer. We're told that there are about 120 of them at this point – a far cry from the crowds of thousands who used to flock around whenever Jesus spoke, but still a significant group. They include some who were followers of Jesus in the first days of His ministry and some who became followers later. They include men and women, and even members of Jesus's own family including Mary his mother and several of His brothers.

Peter is already clearly a leader, even among the 11 remaining core Disciples, and he says they need to get that core group back up to 12. This isn't just because Jesus had chosen 12 but because it was a highly symbolic number. There were 12 Tribes of Israel, descended from the 12 sons of Jacob. This connected the Jewish people to the Patriarchs and to the Covenant that God made with Abraham. The 12 Disciples both harked back to that Covenant and acted as the nucleus of the new Covenant that Jesus had made.

So, having 12 people in the core group of Disciples meant that the group felt complete. More than that, it was a symbol that the 12 Disciples represented all Jews. Seeing that group of 12 Disciples working together to lead the church helped the whole group of believers to feel understood and represented.

Leadership in the church, then, isn't about fulfilling your own mission. Leadership in the church means representing everyone.

It's interesting, then, to see how Peter proposes they pick someone to fill the empty 12th position in the group that Judas had left.

Peter says they should pick someone who'd been there since the beginning of Jesus's ministry. And that's it; that's the only requirement!

Peter wants someone who could be a personal witness to the whole story of Jesus's ministry and teaching. He doesn't say they should pick a natural speaker or teacher, or someone who'd worked miracles, or who'd been chosen by Jesus to be sent out as one of the 12 or the 72. Just a witness.

It's good to be reminded that Jesus didn't just have 12 disciples, even at the start. He quickly gathered a broad group of followers, men and women: some who wandered the country with him, and others (like Mary and Martha) who stayed where they were but supported the rest.

Anyone who'd followed Jesus since the beginning, though, was to be eligible to be one of the 12 Disciples.

Leadership in the church, then, isn't about qualifications or even about abilities. Leadership in the church is about representing everyone and being a witness to the teaching and ministry of Jesus, both during His time on Earth and in our own lives.

It's also interesting that this new leader, this new member of the 12, isn't chosen by the remaining 11 Disciples but by the whole group. The leaders identified a problem, and the church as a whole dealt with it.

Leadership groups have a tendency to perpetuate themselves. They usually contain people who're comfortable making decisions and exercising authority, and very often tend to contain people who are rather similar in outlook. But it's all too easy to forget that a knack for making decisions doesn't make you more important than other believers.

So, Peter sidesteps this problem. He leaves the decision of who this new Disciple should be to the whole church. The 11 Disciples know that they're incomplete but they don't assume that they know best – even though they were literally chosen by Jesus to be his core team!

Leadership in the church isn't about being a natural leader or accumulating power. Leadership in the church is about representing everyone, witnessing to Jesus, and seeing and speaking the truth.

A third interesting thing about the way the early church chose this new Disciple is that they didn't choose at all. There wasn't one 'natural' candidate who was acclaimed by the crowd.

Peter had set some broad guidelines for what he thought they needed, and then the whole group thought about it. I'm sure there was a lot of discussion of which of them had actually been there since the beginning!

This will surely have meant sharing their stories again. Reminding each other of when they'd met Jesus, and each other. Sharing the significant moments in their lives with Jesus. Because that's the sort of conversation Peter's recommendation would naturally lead to!

So, after the talking, the group found that there were a couple of people who could fill the position. Doubtless these weren't the only ones there who'd been with Jesus since the beginning – we have to assume that these two were willing to be one of the group of 12, and that they had the respect of the group as a whole. But, crucially, there were two of them.

Faced with a choice between two candidates, the believers didn't stage hustings and an election. They didn't ask Peter or the core Disciples to decide. Instead, they prayed and they tossed a coin.

Leadership in the church, then, isn't about finding the 'right' person or somehow seeing into the mind of God to understand God's plan. Leadership in the church is about representing everyone, witnessing to Jesus, seeing and speaking the truth, and offering to be chosen rather than being captive to the idea of being 'right'.

This isn't how the world around us 'does' leadership, and that's fine. In our gospel reading today, Jesus reminds us that we believe that He came from God and that everything He told us came from God.

We are God's through Jesus, and Jesus is glorified in us. Jesus is no longer in the world but we are, and Jesus asks the Father to protect us.

Jesus also asks that we will be one with the Father, just as He is. And He asks for us to have truth and holiness, as we are sent out into the world.

Being a member of the church means listening to Jesus's words, following His words, glorifying His name.

Being a member of the church means being in the world, surrounded by it, exposed to it. It means going out into the world as Christians.

Being a member of the church means becoming one with the Father, and being full of truth and holiness.

We are all members of this church. I can tell, because you're here, now. You've come to listen to the words of Jesus in Bible readings and songs and prayers. You've come to remind yourself of truth and holiness. You've come to become closer to God.

This has been a hard year to be a church, and we'll have a hard year ahead, too. Keeping a church community together when we can't meet in person has been hard on many people. And although the end of the isolation may be in sight for many of us, we can't expect to just slip back into our previous 'normal'.

Like the early church, we need to listen again to each other's stories of faith and get to know each other again.

We need to build a community again. Like the early church, we need to look at ourselves and ask whether we're doing things just because we always have, instead of being the people God wants us to be.

Even more importantly, we need to look at ourselves and ask, "Are there gaps?" Can we truly represent the fullness of humanity, symbolically and actually? Or are we a group of 11 disciples and not 12?

And do we recognise the people among us who can be witnesses to Jesus's message about God's kingdom? Do we know each other's stories of faith, and do we enable our fellow believers to grow as Peter did?

Each of us is made in God's own image and is beautiful in God's sight. We live in a world created by God but spoiled by our own actions and inactions. We live with pain, fear, doubt and hopelessness, but Jesus says, "You are mine and I am glorified in you."

As we look for rebirth at Pentecost, as we look to rebuild St Mary and St Michael's church this year, let's remember that we are loved and that we are a community, together.