

## **St Mary Handsworth – 17 May 2015 (Seventh Sunday of Easter-Year B)**

(Acts 1:15-17,21-26)

Last Thursday was a big day for the Church, even if not many people in this country noticed it. In many countries, like Germany, it was a Bank Holiday and, when I was at school, we were given a free day for it. But in England, we've never made very much of it. Last Thursday was Ascension Day, the day when the Church remembers how Jesus was taken up into heaven. He had died, he had been raised from the dead, his work on earth was completed, and before he was parted from his disciples he made them a promise: his Father would give them a new gift. They would be "clothed with power from on high." They would be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And that's what we'll be remembering next Sunday – another big day, the Day of Pentecost. We used to call it Whitsunday. When I was young, we didn't have a Bank Holiday on the last Monday of May; we had it on Whit Monday. So Whitsunday had its own holiday in the same way that Easter still has its holiday on Easter Monday. If we're in church next Sunday, we'll hear the story – the story of how the waiting and praying disciples suddenly heard a sound like a rushing, mighty wind, and how something like tongues of fire descended on to their heads, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit of God

All of that – the Ascension of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost - comes in the first two chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, which St Luke wrote as a sequel or follow-up to his Gospel. But between these two stories, between his account of how Jesus was parted from their sight and his account of how, as they waited and prayed, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, there comes something else. And that is what we heard this morning.

Peter and his fellow apostles had a problem. Jesus had chosen twelve of them out of all the men and women who followed him, twelve to be his apostles or special companions. But one of them had dropped out – Judas, who had turned away from Jesus and betrayed him to those who wanted to kill him. How was he to be replaced, so as to make up the number of twelve?

There was one necessary qualification. It had to be someone who could be a first-hand witness, someone who, like the rest of them, had been with Jesus all the time from when he was baptized by John the Baptist up to the days of his death and his rising from the dead. They needed a man who could share with them in bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus, someone who could say with them, “I have seen the Lord.” They had two candidates, and they asked God to choose. They cast lots between them, and a man called Matthias was chosen.

Now you could say that we are where they were, between Ascension and Pentecost. First, we are asking God to fill up some of the gaps in the number of Jesus’ disciples. All down the centuries there have been some who have turned away like Judas. They need to be replaced with new witnesses. And apart from the Judases, there are the faithful disciples also need to be replaced when their work on earth is done. Without them and their witness all down the years, we ourselves shouldn’t be here.

So just as God chose Matthias to take the place of Judas, so he has chosen us to replace others who have fallen away as well as those who have before us to glory. He has chosen us, just as he chose Matthias, to be his witnesses, witnesses to his resurrection. We are witnesses in two ways. We have heard the story, and we pass it on to our children. And we bear witness by the way we live, as men and women through whose lives the light of Jesus shines in the world. And, dear candidates, he has chosen you. Jesus has chosen you to be his witnesses.

Jesus has chosen us. We’re not here because we have chosen him. We are here because he has chosen us. Jesus doesn’t depend on us. We depend on Jesus. What we have to do is open our hearts to accept his choice – not turn away because it seems too hard for us to walk in his footsteps, not turn away and put it off to another day. Jesus is asking us to say yes to him today and imply accept his choice of us to be among the number of those he has chosen. That is perhaps the hardest part of being a disciple – accepting the fact that God loves us so much that he has chosen us to be disciples of Jesus. It’s something we have to learn afresh every day. God loves me, and God has chosen me to live the life of Jesus.

It is a task for every day. And that is why we have to pray for the gift of the Spirit of Jesus every day. The gift of the Spirit isn't for one day only. The Spirit isn't like water in a bottle – only so much of it, and once we've emptied the bottle, there's no more of it left. The Spirit is like a spring of water that will never run dry. The more we drink of him, the more there is to drink. The Spirit will keep us alive with the life and love of Jesus all the way to our journey's end. All we have to do is open our hearts to him.

So that is our prayer for you today as you take your place among the Lord's disciples. May he fill your lives with his Spirit, not just today but every day, just as he filled the hearts of his first disciples on that first day of Pentecost.