

URC SERVICE SUNDAY 16th MAY 2021 – Service prepared by Nigel Mawdsley

PRAYER OF ADORATION

We come before you, God, in awe and wonder and praise:

blessed by your creation;

moved by the gift of Jesus;

motivated by the indwelling of your Holy Spirit.

We give you thanks for your power that gives us:

eyes to see your working in us;

ears to hear your call and the cry of those around us;

feelings to be moved by your indwelling Spirit.

We give thanks for your reassuring presence with us

that gives us faith to know it is you who speaks and dwells and moves us. **Amen**

BIBLE READING: Acts chapter 1: verses 15-17 & 21-26

SERMON

In our Bible reading today we come across the practice of ‘casting lots’ to decide who should take Judas Iscariot’s place as the twelfth disciple.

According to some Biblical commentaries the practice of casting lots, in order for decisions to be made and issues solved, is found at least eighty eight times in the Old Testament and seven times in the New Testament; the last time casting lots was referred to in the Bible is our reading from Acts today.

When we hear the term, ‘casting lots’, do we think that it is an actual form of gambling? Do we link the term with the word ‘lottery’? Does it remind us of something more sinister when in John chapter 19 verses 23 and 24, with Jesus dying before them on the cross....

‘...the Roman soldiers took Jesus’ clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.

“Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by casting lots who will get it.” So this is what the soldiers did.

Nothing is mentioned about the actual lots themselves, or the precise method in which they were cast. The lots could have been sticks of various lengths; flat stones like coins; some kind of dice; a piece of paper drawn from a bag or some other bespoke way of making a decision. The closest modern practice to casting lots is likely to be the flip of a coin to decide an issue such as who kicks off in a football match.

Casting lots is not seen as gambling any more than rolling the dice in a friendly board game or, as previously mentioned the flip of a coin as a fair way to make a decision.

I remember the 1982 Football World Cup when England had to beat Spain by two clear goals in their last second stage game. It was a very complicated system that had been designed by the footballing authorities and was extremely flawed. Without going into great detail if England had beaten Spain by a single goal casting lots would have taken place with West Germany to decide who would go into the semi-final. It did seem like a bizarre way to decide an important part of a major football tournament. England only drew their last match nil-nil (0-0) with Spain so the lots were not required, but it is an example of how casting lots could have affected something major, in the world of sport, within living memory, and not an ancient practice abandoned centuries ago.

Let's go back to our Bible passage both Joseph and Matthias had been followers of Jesus from the beginning of Jesus' public ministry after the baptism he received from John. Both Joseph and Matthias continued as members of the larger company of Jesus' followers to the time when Jesus ascended to Heaven.

Before the lots were cast the disciples prayed and submitted the decision to the ascended Lord as to who would take over Judas' apostolic ministry. Matthias was chosen, but that isn't to say that Joseph loved God any less or had a weaker faith. Matthias may have had the gift of apostolic ministry whilst Joseph's spiritual gifts would have been in another area of witness and mission. The disciples trusted that God, through their prayer request, would make the correct decision! It is

interesting to note that this is the first time a disciple was chosen without the physical presence of Jesus and *before* the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.

Little is known of what happened in the future lives of Joseph and Matthias after the lots were cast in the latter's favour, but I guess that we can imagine Joseph being disappointed at not being chosen. However, I can also imagine Joseph continuing the Lord's work and using his talents in other ways.

In our own lives we may have lost a decision on the toss of a coin, or something similar, a circumstance of chance that had a disappointing outcome at the time. There may even have been times throughout our lives when we have been overlooked for a particular job, or role, on our career path that was also a bitter disappointment for us.

In May 1981, forty years ago, I became a Christian at Southbank Road Methodist Church Youth Club and often people have inquired if I had ever considered becoming a Methodist minister. The honest answer is that I would have 'loved' to have been called to the ministry as a presbyter, but I've never experienced that calling; it may have been what I wanted, but I believe God had other plans for me. Some of you are aware that I worked in Social Housing for over thirty years and working in an environment was often extremely challenging matured and shaped me as a person. Looking back I believe working in the public sector is what God called me to do as part of my Christian journey and vocation. I also had to endure disappointment at some jobs that I applied for and didn't get, but that is part of life's journey, yet 'doors opened' into other more varied roles.

So what about the disciples decision to cast lots; was there a fairer way to decide who would take Judas' place among the twelve disciples? Probably not, each of the twelve disciples may have had their own personal choice, and yes there could have been an element of chance in how the decision was made, but that element of chance was removed as they placed their faith in God that the right person would be chosen.

The disciples trusted in God, and if we look back on our life's journey can we see where God was at work? Maybe we can, maybe we can't, maybe we've not thought about it too much. Our personal life journey is unique, but I believe that God has brought us all here today, and despite the different talents we have and the different life journeys we have been on we have all made the same decision to gather in worship, or have chosen to read this service.

We are still on our life's journey, but if for some reason you personally feel isolated from God or the world please talk to someone about it. The decision to 'talk' isn't as easy as casting lots, but God may have guided you to watch this service, or read this service today...

The disciples trusted God, and two lines from the hymn 'Trust and Obey' read:

'What He says we will do, where He sends we will go;
Never fear, only trust and obey.'

We can't all be chosen by God to do 'apostolic ministry', but I do believe that God calls us, and actually manoeuvres us, into roles where our talents and gifts can be used, and have been used, to the utmost. **Amen**

PRAYER

Father God, in whose love we live and move,
we pray for a world crying out to feel loved,
wanted, cherished and unique.

We pray for a world torn apart by conflict and war.
A world that lives uneasily in a climate of fear
with no clear vision for future days.

We pray for a world that thinks less of others than of self.
A world where division between nations, race, religion
neighbour and family leads to distrust.

We pray for a world that is short on happiness,
too busy to enjoy this world you have created,
too preoccupied with living to appreciate life.

We pray for a world where spiritual longing is satisfied by fashionable notions and temporary solutions with no thought for tomorrow.

We pray for a world that needs to know your love, your hope, your peace, your joy and Salvation.

A world that needs to know it is special, unique and is uniquely loved by a Heavenly Father. **Amen.**

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