

Sunday 12 May - Seventh Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

After our service today we have our Annual Parochial Church Meeting, where we receive reports on the various activities of the church over the past year and elect officers to serve for the coming year, so it is interesting to note that our reading from the Acts of the Apostles gives us a glimpse of what looks rather like an early church annual meeting. Of course, it isn't an annual meeting, as the church has only been going for a matter of days. We are early in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, just days after Jesus' return to his Father and before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples on the day of Pentecost ten days later.

Luke, the writer, tells us that already there were around one hundred and twenty believers. Peter already seems to have taken on a leadership role among them. It is he who stands up and suggests that they should appoint someone as a replacement for Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Jesus. We tend to think of the twelve disciples as being the only disciples Jesus had, but there were others, perhaps many others, both women and men, who travelled with him, supported him practically and financially and would have been known as his followers. From among these people, Peter suggests they should choose someone to join the remaining eleven apostles, as they will become known.

It needs to be someone who has been an eye witness to Jesus' ministry, someone who has been part of it since the days when John was baptising people, someone who saw the risen Lord for himself. When Peter asks for nominations, they come up with two names: Joseph and Matthias. They pray about the choice and then they cast lots. Casting lots was an ancient practice used by people when they needed to make a decision and wanted God to have some say in it. It was a bit like pulling names out of a hat. Now we would almost certainly do things differently at this point. We might interview Joseph and Matthias and choose whichever of them provides better answer to the questions. Or we might hold an election and let everyone cast their vote for the one they prefer. But the disciples followed the custom their ancestors would have used. They drew lots,

believing that God would influence how the end result turned out. So when Matthias was chosen, they accepted him as the man God had chosen for the job.

Perhaps next time there is a vacancy for a role in the church and no one wants to volunteer for it, I will put all of your names into a hat and see whose comes out. I would need to pray about it first of course. That's the key thing here. They prayed that God would show them which of the two God had chosen and only then did they cast lots. The disciples were used to Jesus praying before he made key decisions. He had prayed before he called the twelve disciples who followed him most closely. They understood that praying was an important part of carrying on the work Jesus had given them to do.

We can learn something from that. For some of you, it will come naturally to pray before you make a big decision. For others here, that might be a new idea. Praying for God's guidance is – or should be – part of what Christians do. We might not cast lots, but we can be open to looking for God to show us the right choice in other ways. I remember when I was looking to move on from my last church in Hertfordshire, I had always assumed that my next church would be in Hertfordshire too. I liked living in Hertfordshire, it suited us for family reasons, I had no reason to want to move from the diocese I was in. The problem was that weren't any suitable posts available at the time when I needed to move. I had begun to wonder if maybe I needed to look for a post in another diocese. I was praying about it quite a lot. At that time – this was before we all had smartphones with Google maps on them – I had a Hertfordshire street plan book that lived in the door pocket of my car. It had been there for thirteen years and had never once fallen out. In that week that I started asking God whether I should be looking for posts outside Hertfordshire, that book fell out of the car door pocket for no good reason three times. I started reading the job advertisements in the Church Times.

If we ask God to guide us in the right direction, we should expect God to give us answers. Today, we are baptising a young child into the fellowship of the church. Isobel is joining the company of people who call themselves disciples of Jesus. Her parents and godparents are making promises about bringing her up in the Christian faith. At the end of the service, we will be giving Isobel a candle to remind her that Jesus, the Light of the world, the risen Lord, walks beside her to guide her on her path through life. It is a little while yet before Isobel will have any truly important decisions to make for herself, but the candle also serves as a

reminder to her parents to ask for God's guidance as they make decisions on her behalf and for their task as parents.

All of us can ask for God's help any time we have a decision to make. Sometimes we only pray about a decision if we feel it is a difficult one. We are less inclined to pray if we think the choice is obvious. Maybe we should train ourselves always to pray because it is always possible the obvious choice might not be the right choice. I wonder whether anyone thought Joseph was the obvious person to choose rather than Matthias? If we do ask God to guide our choice, then we need to give God an opportunity to tell us the answer. The early disciples cast lots. We might prefer another way of seeking God's wisdom. We do need to have our eyes and ears open so that we notice what God might have to say to us. God has chosen us to be disciples. We need to allow God to show us what work we have been given to do.