

SERMON: 2018/05/13 (7th Sunday in Easter, Year B) - Acts 1:15-17,21-26; 1 John 5:9-13 & John 17:6-19_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

[Print the name of the twelve Apostles on letter-size cards, and additional ones for Joseph and Matthias. Print the picture of a noose on the back of Judas']

On Thursday night - for those of you who weren't with us - the Church celebrated the "Ascension" (when Jesus left earth to return to His rightful place with God in Heaven). [Pause. Stare up into space for a moment, shielding eyes with a hand.]

Now, His last words were to His friends, "the Apostles," and He told them to "proclaim the good news to the *whole* creation." [Mk. 16:15]
- that's the "Good News" that Jesus 'bore our sins in [H]is body on the cross, so that, free...we might live...[again, forever!]', [1 Pet. 2:24-25].

And so they quickly hurried back to "their" house in Jerusalem to discuss how best to go about this: because even though they were very excited to do as Jesus had asked - as we should be too! - they also wanted to be efficient, you see.

And, we hear - this morning, Peter, stood up [Acts 1:15] (to suggest a plan, about dividing the whole of the (*known*) world into *twelve* equal parts. I'm adding, by the way, some detail from a non-Biblical account written by a man called Eusebius.*)

But there was a problem - there were now only *eleven* living companions: there was...

[Ask for 11 children to come forward, one-at-a-time, and receive a card with the name of an Apostle, and then stand facing the congregation.]

Who was missing?

[Wait for response.]

That's right: Judas,
[Hold up a card with "Judas" written on it.]
- the one who betrayed Jesus.

And he was so ashamed of what he'd done, that he killed himself. [Turn card around to reveal picture of a noose.]

And this meant that there was a missing "part" to Peter's plan without an

evangelist, which was *really* unacceptable.

So, the Apostles would need to adapt and find a replacement for him.

But, "Who?, they wondered.

And then two brave and faithful men stepped forward: a man called Joseph "Justus" and another one called Matthias.

And God chose Matthias.

[Hand Matthias' card to a child, and have him/her take their place next to the other 11.]

[Gesture to the 12.] And I've a question for you: has their mission finished? Were they *completely* successful?

"Yes" or "no"?

(Has the 'whole creation' become *Christian*?)

[Wait for response.]

Right!

How can we tell that their job isn't over?

Because we all know people who don't love Jesus, and that's up to us: to "step forward" like Joseph "Justus" and Matthias and help fill in the "gaps."

So, let's pray: Father God...

[Dismiss children.]

How often do you pray?

And when you pray what is it that you pray for?

Do you pray for each other?

Do you take away the bulletin(-card) with its list of names and pray over the individuals named there? - many of whom are in *dire* need of help from "above."

Or are your prayers infrequent and then mostly *selfish* and *self-centred*?

According to the research-people *Pew*, Episcopalians are among the *least* prayerful groups in American society, with *fifteen-percent* reporting that *they never* (even) pray! [n.1]

And I hope this isn't us, but I fear it might be given how few of you do take away the bulletin!

Yet we all *desperately* need heavenly intervention in our lives, no?

In various ways?

Consider, for example, this: that prayer is especially essential to your (personal) spiritual "success" as a Christ-follower, called upon to *imitate* Him [Phil. 2:8/Jn.

13:34], and, therefore, *by aggregate*, to the success of this congregation and the Church in this nation and the world.

It all begins *with you*.

We can take some comfort, then, that at least there is one who *is* praying, and praying for you even now at this very moment: and that's Jesus.

Jesus, we see, in today's gospel extract, prays *for you* - '[H]is disciples'; [Jn. 17:6]. And I want you to let that sink in (for a moment). [Pause.]

Jesus - God Himself, the one who 'knit [you] together in [your] mother's womb' [Ps. 139:13], and who has given everything for you, including His life(!), *continues* to make a "sacrifice" of His time and thought to intercede with His father.

That's humbling, right?

A "game-changer"?

Picture Him as John in *Revelation* saw Him: sat on a throne made of rainbows, surrounded by four fantastical, winged beasts - the 'creature like a lion, the...eagle' with many eyes, and they're singing to Him, "holy, holy, holy," over and over, and then see Him stepping down, clearing a space on the floor among the many crowns that righteous kings (of the past) have thrown there [see: Rev. 4:2-10]; and then getting on His knees, clasping His hands together [do so], and saying *your* name [point].

I'm exaggerating my case a little, of course; but only slightly:

I just want you to grasp the enormity of what it means for the Bible to "let slip" that 'the King of kings and Lord of lords' [see: 1 Tim. 6:15] is saying prayers on *your* behalf.

And what does He pray for you and for me?

That God would 'protect' and "guard" us from becoming 'lost', [v. 11-12]; and 'that [we] may be one', [v. 11].

So, that's two things.

Separate but connected.

The first issue is of the greatest importance, and Jesus *labors* the point, specifying that it is from 'the evil one' that Christians need God's assistance. And if this is something that worried *Him*, it should *absolutely* concern us: that the Devil is attempting to undermine what is good and right in our lives and in this country.

How, exactly, he does this isn't clear: 'the concept of Satan is not well developed' in the Scriptures [n.2] - and it is almost as if the ancient authors presume we know more about this pernicious "Adversary" than we moderns remember, but what *does* emerge, *very clearly*, is that he takes power and control only where he is

allowed to - where we - or the LORD - give it to him; and if we don't want his malicious mischief-making in our lives, God can do for us as He did for Job, which is to build a "fence" around our homes and our loved ones, [1:10].

So, Jesus asks Him to do this.

But do we?

Or are we complacent?

Too lazy?

Because this is an unnecessary and avoidable risk:

'The Bible...indicate[s]...that prayer actually changes things directly, with God's permission... That is, our prayers are part of the work needed in order to accomplish God's will. They aren't to persuade God that [H]e needs to do something; they are somehow being *used* by God to get that thing done.' [n.3]

Like a mysterious, ethereal currency - an invisible one - like buying things online with PayPal: I don't see actual money - crumpled up bank-notes and handfuls of coins - exchange hands between myself and another, but days later when the parcel arrives on my porch I know something *real* has taken place; the status quo has been *tangibly* altered.

Likewise with prayer.

This is, at least, certainly one of the lessons implied in the reading: '[And s]uddenly, I'm left with the realisation that I might achieve much more for God [and my community] if I change the busy schedule that stops me praying. As John Wesley said, "Prayer us where the action is."' [n.4]

Which brings me (back) to the second issue Jesus prays for us about:

'that [we] may be one', [v. 11].

Here, there can be no doubt that He is referring to the unity of Christians - that we would be a single 'body' - and that's the most common symbol used about the church after the term, "bride."

That we are supposed to be a single body.

And are we?

What do you think?

Let's be real.

A body is a genuinely unified thing; visibly a single entity.

Its parts are *responsive* to each other, even though they might be distant from each other and not obviously attached: like the mouth and your knee. *Completely* different: you'd never mistake one for the other - you wouldn't try and feed a sandwich into your knee, nor would you try and play hacky-sack with your mouth ; but when a person grazes their knee - as Poppy did the other day - you could tell that she had because her lips pursed and wrinkled in pain.

The empathy is absolute and it registers; it elicits an observable, measurable response.

And is that the Church today?

You know, *millions* of Christians have been killed and brutalised in the Middle East by Islamists over the last few years - and vanished entirely from some regions to which "The 12" themselves brought the Gospel [n.5]; and how has that affected us?

What *change* has that wrought in our denomination?

Do we even *pray* for their protection?

This is the specific challenge that, I believe, Jesus is presenting with us today: to be praying for each other - diligently, enthusiastically, *daily*; trusting that it really makes a difference; that it has *worth*.

And anything that is worth anything *costs* us something - but that's the essence of faithfulness to our Saviour; the price of the new life we've found in Him.

Let me finish with a quote from that famous saint, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'Ultimately, it does not matter whether prayer has on the street or in one's room, whether it is short or long, whether it is in [latin] or [consists merely of] the sighs of those who do not know how they should pray, whether it is done by an individual or a community. The only thing that matters is knowing that' 'God has the heart of a loving parent [and is poised, waiting to hear]'. [n.6]

Footnotes:

* See: Maier, Paul L. (2007), *Eusebius: The Church History*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Kregel Publications, 80.

1. See graph 2: 'Frequency of Prayer', <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-prayer/> (accessed May 11, 2018).
2. Page, Sydney H. T. (September 2007), 'Satan: God's Servant', *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 50, No. 3 pp. 449-465, 449.
3. Instone-Brewer, David (March 2017), 'The Power of Prayer', *Premier Magazine*, pp. 62-63, 62. (My emphasis.)
4. *Ibid.*, 63.
5. Osborne, Simon (20th of December 2017), 'Archbishop Warns Christians Could be 'Extinguished' as Prince Charles Describes Heartbreak', *The Express*, available at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/894424/Prince-Charles-heartbreak-plight-Middle-East-Christians> (accessed May 12, 2018).
6. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich (2003), *Discipleship* (Volume 4 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*), edited by Kelly, Geoffrey B. & Godsey, John D.; translated by Green, Barbara & Krauss, Reinhard, Minneapolis, M. N.: Fortress Press, 154. To this, he adds (on the following page), which is such an important point but

tangential to my conclusion: 'That liberates the disciples from false belief in works.'