

How the apostles select Matthias (Easter 7B) (Acts 1:15-17, 21-26)

## **It's an interesting contrast with the ways leadership and oversight have been handled since.**

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Today's passage from Acts shows the followers of Jesus making their first big decision after Jesus departs: finding a replacement for Judas (about whom, well, read on).

Specifically, Peter insists that someone must be found to take over his "position as overseer" (*episkope*), a reference to Psalm 109 and the first time that term is applied to one of Jesus' apostles.

As a foundational moment for the life of the church after the earthly ministry of Jesus, the selection of Judas's successor makes an interesting contrast with the ways leadership and oversight have been handled since.

First, there's the matter of qualifications: Peter says that the new overseer has to be one of those who have "accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up." This is a rather high requirement in itself—no feeding-miracle or Easter-morning bandwagoners, thank you very much—that not only encapsulates Jesus' entire preaching career but connects the church explicitly to the ministry of John.

Second, there's the role itself. The new apostle will be "a witness with us to his resurrection." This sounds like a rather narrower brief than any form of Christian ministry that takes shape later.

Finally, there's the process itself, which begins with prayer and concludes with a casting of lots to determine God's election. An echo of this process lives on in the Holy Altar Lottery by which the Coptic Orthodox pope is chosen.

This cannot help but make a sharp contrast with the extended professional training and wide-ranging job description required of many of those called to the less exalted task of parish clergy. Whether Matthias had any gifts for running meetings, standing up youth programs, or executing capital campaigns is a question left unanswered by the text. Matthias and Joseph Barsabas met the requirements of the office, after which there was no particular need for judgment or evaluation. You need a witness, and God will give you one.

Jesus is not on hand to swing human history by calling out to Simon and Andrew rather than the guys one boat over, and by eliciting their immediate and trusting response. But here the nascent church repeats this dependence on divine providence on its own account. There may be a lesson in that for us.

Likewise with the conclusion of the story of Judas, delicately excised from our lectionary passage. In Matthew's account, Judas hangs himself. Here the betrayer's death is more mysterious, with some kind of violent internal illness causing him to literally spill his guts in the field he bought with his ill-gotten gains. There is a counter-tradition of ambivalent portrayals of Judas, as far back as the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas and more prominently in modern literature. In Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Judas is an almost tragic figure, murdered by Pontius Pilate. There is no such ambivalence in Acts.

Our age has had its own object lessons in those who turned from a position of sacred trust and responsibility to act wickedly. Both the loss of Judas and the calling of Matthias belong to the mystery of divine calling and human motive in "this ministry and apostleship." While the text itself does not invite us to psychologize these two men, the terrible warning and curious blessing their paired stories leave for us are an occasion for the whole community to reflect on the roles, meanings, and spiritual dangers of the duty to bear witness.