

The Day After the Ascension

When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. -Acts 1:13-14

Ascension Day this year was yesterday, Thursday May 13th. The day after the Ascension, Friday, May 14th, is the Commemoration of St. Matthias. Our liturgical and historical calendars converge in a unique way that focuses our attention on the church's preparations for life after the pandemic.

In Luke's account of the Ascension in Acts 1, the angels cut short the disciples' reverent gazing into heaven and reassure them that Jesus would return in just the same way that they had seen him go. Remembering Jesus' last command and wondering when and how "the power from on high" would descend on them, they make their way a thousand paces back into the city to the secret Upper Room where they had last eaten with the Risen Jesus and begin the prayer vigil of Pentecost. The first task for the day after the Ascension is devoting ourselves to prayer. The convergence of our calendars leads to the question: is devoting ourselves to prayer our first task "after the pandemic?" If it is, what will that time of prayer look like? Surely it will involve discussion about the life of the church, when and how we come back to in-person worship, how live-streaming and on-line postings continue in our congregational life, what our service schedule will be, how we will celebrate Holy Communion, what form Christian Education, Youth Group, Confirmation, PACE will take, how we will do Christian fellowship, and what priority all these things will have in our lives. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it has taught us that we were far too busy with far too many things to be able to focus on what is most important to our lives.

Jesus's 120 disciples had much to discuss and pray about in the Upper Room after the Ascension. Their past life was irretrievably gone; the shape of the new life was so new and so undefined they hardly knew anything about it except what they themselves were experiencing. Men and women were praying together, spiritual relations and blood relatives of Jesus were together as one, Jesus' mother Mary had a unique role, and though Jesus had ascended into heaven he was still present in the absent centre, his command to bear the good news of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection resounded in their hearts, and he himself promised to empower that witness, accompany that witness with miracles, and fulfill that witness with his own return with glory. His ascension into heaven, far from removing him, assured them that what had seemed impossible was possible with God, that everything he had promised was possible! Amazingly, the discussion and prayer focused on one act, the final act of the disciples before the coming of the Holy Spirit constituted them as the Church. Somehow they were led to fill out the number of apostles again to twelve, restoring in Jesus' Name what Jesus had named while he had walked among them in the flesh. And to allow Jesus himself to choose from the two best candidates, they "cast lots"—akin to a game of "pick-up-sticks" in which the candidate who chose the designated stick would reveal the will of the Lord for the succession. Joseph Barsabbas, also known as Justus, was as equally qualified as Matthias—I have no doubt he laughed and clapped Matthias on the back and continued to tell the good news about Jesus even without official recognition as Judas' replacement. Considering that we never hear about either of them again in the Bible, we can be sure they both did exactly what they were commissioned to do: they told everyone everywhere how the good news about the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ had changed their lives.

The pandemic has changed our church too. Just as the disciples' discussion and prayer moved toward their last act as "the church in utero", so our discussion and prayer about life after the pandemic will lead us to bold and decisive action too. We will doubtless have vacancies in important leadership positions in our congregations and churches. Who will we look for to fill them? Surely we will need people who will witness to how the life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus helped them through the pandemic. Then, whether appointed officially like Matthias, or unofficially like Joseph Justus, may we also tell the good news to everyone everywhere, welcoming all, worshipping together, and working together by the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ.