

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 17 May 2015 – Sunday after Ascension Year B)  
Acts 1.15-17, 21-16; Psalm 1; I John 5.9-13; John 17.6-19

‘The lot fell upon Matthias’. What is it like to be chosen? This afternoon, at Wembley Stadium, Bristol Rovers will be playing Grimsby Town in the Conference play-off final. For those of you to whom this means nothing, the winning team will get back into the Football League, as Oxford United did a few seasons ago. I was brought up in a family with a long history of involvement in Grimsby Town, right back to its Victorian origins, and I can tell you that I had no choice in the matter at all. By the time I was able to think and read I was already a supporter. I can tell you what it means to be chosen: occasional flashes of hope, which always manage to dissolve into a sea of disappointment. I was chosen and there’s nothing I can do but grin and bear it and, in all probability, by four o’clock this afternoon resign myself to more of the same. It reminds me a bit of the prophet Jeremiah, who announces at the beginning of the book that God called him to speak the word of the Lord before he was born and has to bear the consequences, mostly having a rough time of it at the hands of his contemporaries.

Usually, though, we have a bit more say in the matter. It may not entirely surprise you that when teams were being chosen for rugby or cricket I would almost always be among the last to be picked. Jesus said that in God’s kingdom the first would be last and the last first, but his words offered scant comfort in such moments. For when someone is chosen, someone else will feel rejected. My late uncle Stephen, notably eccentric, in part as a result of his traumatic wartime experiences in the Libyan desert, once stood as a deacon in his local Congregational church, and was not elected. For years afterwards he would refer to himself, not without a degree of sadness, as a failed deacon. On the other hand, being chosen or elected comes with its own temptations: to think of oneself as better than, superior to, the person you’ve beaten to it. When it comes to being a chosen people, the danger is magnified. Many pages of the Old Testament writings are taken up with arguments about what this implies. Does it give you special privileges and rights which others don’t have, so that you can exercise

your superiority over them; or does it confer moral and spiritual responsibilities which are hard to bear?

Many of us made a choice last Thursday week. A few nights before the General Election we were talking after dinner in college about whether or not voting should be compulsory, given that a third of the population prefers not to exercise its democratic rights. Some people thought that on-line voting was the way forward. Others, like me, rather like the distinctly low-tech way in which you stand in a basic little partition and use a stubby little pencil attached to a piece of string to mark your X on the paper. On the night itself, as the results flowed in, we watched winners who were delighted and losers who were gutted. Some of the latter will, no doubt, go on to lucrative careers elsewhere, but others will struggle. So spare a thought for poor old Joseph Barsabbas, also known as Justus, the losing candidate when the apostles cast lots to fill the vacancy left by Judas Iscariot and the lot fell upon Matthias. We don't know how he took it or what he did thereafter; he disappears from view, as losers tend to. But he is part of the story; the story of everyone who seeks to follow the way of Jesus, and especially those who fail.

We've all agonized over choices: schools, careers, moving house, commitments of various kinds. Together they shape our future, which is why human history is full of rituals and customs intended to help us make them. Ancient Israel had the Urim and Thummim, part of the high priests's breastplate, which could be consulted as oracles. In the classical world, poets were believed to be inspired by the gods, none more so than Virgil. If you were faced with a decision and wanted to know what the future held for you, you might open his epic poem the *Aeneid* at a random page and wherever your finger pointed the text would be interpreted as prophetic. This practice, known as the *sortes virgilianae*, was also used with the Bible. There's a famous example in the story of the conversion of St Augustine from paganism to Christianity in the fourth century. As he was reading in a garden he heard a child's voice singing 'Tolle et lege', 'Take up and read'. He opened his Bible and his eyes fell on verses from Romans 13: 'Let us live honourably as in the day, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires'. Since he

was rather a naughty boy these words hit home, and if you happened to have watched Professor MacCulloch's recent series on Christianity and Sex you'll know all about the consequences.

In the University of Salamanca in the sixteenth century, then one of Europe's leading intellectual centres, professors of biblical studies had to undergo a version of this practice. As part of what we would call the interview process, a Bible would be opened at random and a finger point at a text on the page; whereupon the candidate had to expound it to the best of his abilities. They must have prayed hard to avoid getting Leviticus. It feels to us now like superstition: we don't choose ministers by making them preach on a text selected in this way, and we don't choose our elders by casting lots. But we still fret when choices have to be made; and while there's not much harm in feeling a glow of satisfaction if we succeed in an application or are elected to an office, the Christian virtue of humility is harder to maintain. It's a natural human reaction to think that if we knew what the future held, what the consequences of our choices might be, we would make better decisions to begin with. But we don't have that luxury. We have to make them as best we can, uncertain if they are the right ones and haunted, when things don't go according to plan, by the siren song of the 'if only'.

The lot fell upon Matthias. David Cameron won an overall majority. The New Testament speaks of Christians as chosen by God. But chosen for what? For rewards others cannot have? For approval they are denied? Think again. When Jesus says to his disciples 'You did not choose me; I chose you' he continues 'And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last'. Clearly, then, there is a purpose in being chosen, a creative and enduring one. We are not chosen because we are special or uniquely favoured; we are chosen to nurture seeds into flower and flower into fruit in the garden of the Lord: for divine horticulture, not human self-aggrandisement; to plant for solid joys and lasting treasures, as John Newton would put it in his hymn. The images are beautiful, compelling even; but they will not touch us as they should if we don't translate them into our own time and experience. I was struck, therefore, by two quite different words words which Jesus emphasizes in John 17: the world, and sanctify. At first sight they seem unconnected and unhelpful: Jesus speaks in negative

terms of what he calls ‘the world’, which seems to give legitimacy to all those world-denying tendencies found in religious traditions yet surely alien to a faith based on incarnation, on God’s embrace of materiality. ‘Sanctify’ is one of those religious words which float in the air, disconnected from our earthed realities. But John is a subtle writer who does not fall into these traps. We should not read about this negative world here without remembering the most famous text of all, in John 3: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son’. The word remains the same, *kosmos* in Greek, but the meaning has shifted. There is a world of need into which the Christ has been born, to raise it up out of its fallen state; and there is a world which will always resist that process, the world which persecutes and kills the very one who comes to save it from itself. That second world is the one we know all too well. It is with us in the pages of our newspapers and on the screens of our televisions and computers; a world which is full of violence and cruelty, of people fleeing war and persecution, of governments which slaughter their citizens, of politicians who mouth words of hatred in the way the Psalmist so memorably calls ‘words softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords’ (55.21). It is also the world which is found in each one of us, when self-interest triumphs over the common good and when we become agents of hurt and not healing. We all know that world and the damage it inflicts. Can its hold on us ever be broken? We dream of it and we despair of it and it is precisely for this that God sent his Son into it.

He came then and is present now to heal the world; to sanctify it; to make it whole, holy. The words are variations on the same theme. Christian disciples do not belong to the world in the sense that their values are not those which bring such sorrow to so many. They cry out and work for justice wherever it is denied; locally, nationally, across the globe. They seek to build peace, not fan the flames of terror and war. They show a generosity of spirit, compassion, love in action, wherever narrowness, indifference and recrimination squeeze out hope from human hearts. Such, Paul tells are the fruits of the Spirit; and, changing the image but not the idea, the garments God’s chosen ones are to wear. In this or any small congregation it would be foolish to assume that we must single-handedly change the world or count ourselves as failures and give up. The world we are called to sanctify is usually to be found on our

doorstep, though of course we shall want to be engaged as far as we can in larger campaigns to rid the world of everything which prevents people from living in freedom and equality. It is to make this Gospel heard and seen and practised that we have been chosen, in succession to all those before us who have let the light of Christ shine through their words and deeds. However often we fail, however inadequate we feel, that is our calling; and when we respond, gifts of grace come to us, sufficient even in our weakness to enable us to continue Christ's ministry.

A word of warning, though. Do not expect plaudits; the joy of quiet service is its own reward. Expect resistance and expect criticism. They are signs that you are on the disciples' road, which not for nothing is called the way of the Cross. On that road no one is chosen because they are worth more in the sight of God than anyone else, and it is often rough underfoot. Christians choose to follow the way of Christ because it unmasks hypocrisy and smugness, because it lets the fullness of our humanity out of the prisons in which we keep it chained. And in so choosing, we find that the lot has already fallen on us: unable to keep quiet when the voice of protest must be heard; running counter to the culture we inhabit wherever it diminishes individuals or harms creation; patiently, humbly and persistently working for the triumph of love.