

Sixth Sunday of Easter
17th May 2020



Dear Friends in Christ,

'Because I live, you also will live.'

(John 14: 19)

On Thursday of this week, 14th May 2020, the Church of England observed a 'Black Letter' day in commemorating the Festival of St Matthias, the Apostle. In our current state of turmoil, you could be forgiven for having missed it. Even in a good year, except for the faithful who observe the daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, Matthias' Festival often goes unnoticed. This is a great shame, because Matthias' story has much to commend it. His personal witness to Jesus' ministry and subsequent response to his risen Lord gifts us with a strong model of discipleship from which to draw, especially in these times of Coronavirus: *'Because I live, you also will live!'*



'St Matthias' by Hendrik Goltzius

That said, not much is known about Matthias! There is no mention of a Matthias among the lists of the disciples or followers of Jesus in the three Synoptic gospels, but according to Luke's account of him in the Book of Acts, we read that Matthias had been among those who had witnessed Jesus' ministry, *'beginning from John the Baptist's baptism of Jesus up until the day Jesus was taken up from us.'* (Acts 1: 22).

In those early days after Jesus' Ascension to heaven, His followers were once again in a state of confusion and flux. Following His Crucifixion, as we have been exploring during these past few weeks of Easter, Jesus revealed Himself to the disciples and convinced them that He truly *had* risen from the dead. Jesus walked with them, He talked with them, let them touch His wounds and even ate food with them. I imagine the disciples quickly fell back into a pattern of familiarity around Jesus' presence among them in those 40 days between His Resurrection and His Ascension. Through His gentle encouragement and guidance, they began to piece together the teachings of Jesus' earthly ministry; filling in the many gaps they still had in their minds about the Kingdom of God. Mirroring the 40 days of Jesus' own time of wilderness as He too assimilated the sacrifices His Father was asking of Him in the time to come, so now these followers of the Way were deepening their understanding of their faith and what was being asked of *them*. Matthias was one of their number; part of the wider group of disciples, which Acts tells us numbered *'some 120 believers.'* (Acts 1: 15).



'Ascension' by Giotto di Bondone

Yet in the midst of these exhilarating and precious weeks of the first Easter, Jesus leaves them. On the day of His Ascension to heaven, His devastated friends face the fact that they are finally going to have to get used to living in a world without Jesus – or at least, living in a world without the Jesus they have known. Jesus is now saying to them: *'It's going to be different. Don't expect to see me around in the old way!'* They must have felt deeply disoriented and fearful.

It was in this context of loss and confusion that Acts tells us how Matthias came to prominence. With all the questions, doubts, and dangers facing them, Peter gathered the 120 disciples in prayer and focussed their attention on finding a replacement for Judas to join the remaining 11 apostles. There is often confusion as to the difference between disciples and apostles. The Greek word for disciple is *'mathetes'* from the verb *'to learn,'* and the Latin *'discipulus'* gives us an understanding of discipline in this learning. So, to be a disciple of Christ is to be on a lifelong and intentional, disciplined journey to learn about and from Jesus as *'The way, the truth and the life.'* (John 14: 6). The Greek word for Apostle is *'apostellein'* from the verb *'to send'* and the Latin *'mittere'* gives us an understanding of Mission and purpose in this being 'sent out' (John 20: 21) to spread the Good News of Jesus. So, whilst Apostles are also part of the discipleship of Christian followers who are growing in the light of Christ, they have been identified by Jesus to serve Him as one who is sent out to teach and to proclaim Jesus as our risen Lord and Saviour.

To this end, Peter knew he had to restore the ministry of the twelve Apostles with a missional zeal. He had one criterion - that, like Andrew, James, John and Peter himself, the new apostle must be someone who had been a disciple from the very beginning in order for this new apostle to be a credible witness to Jesus' resurrection. Two candidates were proposed: Joseph (called Barsabbas) and Matthias. Then they all prayed: *'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.'* (Acts 1:24-25). We are then told that the disciples cast lots to decide between the two men. The lot fell to Matthias; so he was numbered with the eleven apostles. In that moment, his whole life changed, in service to Jesus.



The Calling of St Matthias by Matteo Stom

Matthias, whose name is derived from the Hebrew, signifying a *'gift of Yahweh,'* is said to have embraced his apostolic ministry with great determination and enthusiasm, witnessing the resurrection of Jesus: teaching, baptising and growing disciples in the service of his Lord and Saviour. He took to heart Christ's message of eternal life: *'Because I live, you also will live,'* and carried it to all who would listen.

Some historical Coptic accounts cite Matthias preaching in Judea and onwards to Cappadocia and the coasts of the Caspian Sea, until his eventual persecution and death, possibly in the modern Georgian region of Adjara. According to the Byzantine Emperor, Nicephorus, Matthias evangelised in Judea and across Biblical Ethiopia, and was crucified at Sebastopolis in Armenia. Still others maintain that Matthias was stoned at Jerusalem and then beheaded, which is why he is often depicted as carrying an axe or a sword. However, according to Hippolytus of Rome, Matthias died of old age in Jerusalem! Whatever we believe about the physical course of Matthias' life, it is his personal witness and spiritual conviction, having seen Jesus' ministry and miracles, His crucifixion, death and resurrection, which is significant to us in our lives.



The Apostle, Matthias by Rubens

Artistic images of Matthias are typically of him as an older man, reflecting how Jesus calls us at any age. Jesus did not call Matthias from the outset of His ministry along with Peter and the others. Instead, Jesus recognised what he would become, and then called Matthias into a flourishing missional ministry, as Clement of Alexandria observed, not because Matthias *was* worthy, but because he would *become* worthy.

Matthias' personal apostolic ministry begins at the very time Jesus goes away, at the Ascension. Yet Jesus had promised He would fill his friends with the power of His Spirit when He brought them words of comfort during The Last Supper. John's Gospel account today shines a light on Jesus' understanding that His apostles had given up everything to follow Jesus. His promise to them was that He 'would not leave them as orphans.' (John 14: 18). He would come to them through the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide them. To bring them solace and light their path through the darkest of times.

During this current Pandemic, plenty of people look around and say, 'This is a world *without* God.' Yet more people are *finding* God; receiving answers to their fears in the solace and comfort of prayer. Whatever we may be feeling from moment to moment, we've been given a new relationship with Jesus that doesn't depend on our being able to see Him and speak with Him in the way His friends were able to do during His earthly life and immediately after His resurrection. This new relationship with Jesus means that we are able to turn in complete trust to God as Father in the way Jesus did, and also to respond to the apparently God-less world with something of His compassion and His transfiguring energy. For, as Dr Rowan Williams reflects, Jesus hasn't just 'gone away.' He has gone deeper into the heart of reality. He has become far more than a friend or companion; He has shown Himself to be the very centre of our life, the source of our loving energy in the world and the source of our prayerful, trustful waiting on God. The source of all love. Love that will overcome the deepest evil of the world.



The Last Supper by Tintoretto

The friends of Jesus, every one of us, are called to offer ourselves as signs of God in our fragile and fearful world – to live in such a way that the underlying, all-pervading energy of God begins to come through us and make a difference – just as it did through Matthias. Do you feel yourself being called in a new direction within your family or community? Or have you ever resented someone new being called into share their wisdom or insights? Matthias didn't ask to become one of the twelve, yet he recognised his calling and rose to the challenge. May we also be worthy of the challenges we are faced with in our lives, and supportive of this same calling in others. Together, as the body of Christ, we must grasp the opportunities we are given to be worthy witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus in the way we live the eternal life with which we have each been blessed. Our continuing discipleship and growth into apostleship is rooted in the truth Jesus left us with: *'Because I live, you also will live!'*



Old Woman Praying by Matteo Stom

If we are challenged as to where God is in the darkness of our contemporary world, our answer must be to ask ourselves how we can live, pray and act so as to bring to light the energy at the heart of all things – so that, just like Matthias, we grow into our worthiness, bringing the face of Jesus to life in our own faces, and to do this by turning again and again to the deep well of trust and prayer which the Holy Spirit opens up for us.

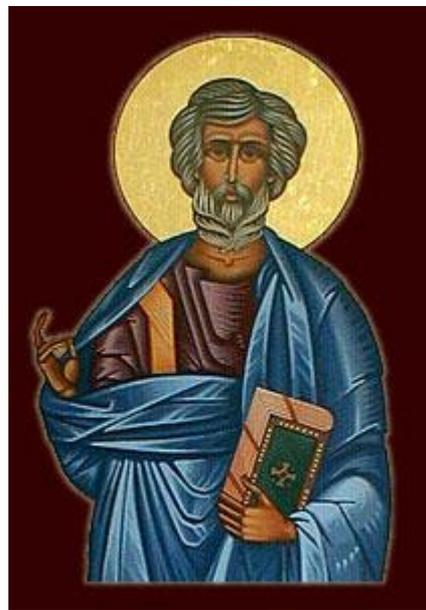
Yours, in the life of Christ,

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for the Week – The Sixth Sunday of Easter

God our Redeemer,
You have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of Your Son:
grant, that as by His death He has recalled us to life,
so by His continual presence in us He may raise us to eternal joy;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with You,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.



Images of St Matthias - Goslar Stadtmuseum

John 14:15-21 (NRSV) - The Promise of the Holy Spirit

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

