

Reading: Acts 1:15-26

Text: Acts 1:26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Theme: *The choosing of and the qualifications of an Apostle*

Many of us, during our working lives, are familiar with the task of choosing or selecting people to join the companies, the schools, the government departments, or some other organisations, like a Church, that have been entrusted to our care and management.

There are processes that we follow, which are fairly standard: we put together a selection panel with its chair, define the requirements for the position, identify the skills set and the kind of individual that is needed for the position, advertise the position, conduct the interviews, make the selection, and inform the successful applicant. The same is happening in the passage that we read today.

According to Luke, the author of Acts, there is a vacancy in the Apostolic Council, the body that governed the early Church, after Judas had left the community following his betrayal of Jesus. The apostles have identified the biblical basis that necessitates the replacement of Judas, and they are now going through the process of finding someone to fill the vacant position.

They have already had a selection panel with Peter as its Chair. And they are now determining the qualifications and the kind of person that would meet the requirements of the position of Apostle. This establishes the Selection Criteria. The first criterion says the position is open only to men. Second, only 'men who have accompanied [the apostles] during all the time that Jesus went in and out among [them], beginning from the baptism of John until the day when Jesus was taken up from [them],' qualify (v21&22). The third and final criterion says, the successful applicant 'must become a witness with [them] to [Jesus'] resurrection' (v22).

If the selection were held today, the second part of the process would normally be to advertise the position and call for applications. But the Church leaders are calling for nominations instead. 'So, they proposed two, Joseph, called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias (v23).

The last part of the selection process nowadays would have been an interview of the applicants where a successful applicant would be chosen. The Church leaders, however, use the Roman method of casting lots (v26) after they have prayed (v24-25). 'The lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles' (v26).

I have read today's passage many times, but I did not find anything exciting about it then until I decided to preach on it today. And I was quite surprised to find some really exciting and juicy bits that we could easily miss if we do not read it with what philosopher Karl Popper calls, a 'searchlight'; that is, that we 'look into' what we are reading with expectations, and not just decipher the words in texts. Below is a sample of these interesting observations.

First, this was the Church's first ever election of any kind. Considering the role that the Church has played ever since in shaping society, and the minds and heart of individuals, what happened in today's passage has been fairly consequential. For example, the Selection Criteria is amazingly very modern in that the gender bias in favour of males that was normal only a few decades ago and some are still struggling with it today, is very clear in Peter's speech. This is an issue that prompted Australian theologian, Val Webb, to ask the following question in a sermon she preached at Wesley Uniting, Canberra, in 2006: "Why was Matthias chosen ahead of Mary Magdalene?"

Webb made the point that this was the only time in the Bible that we read about Matthias, while Mary Magdalene is a prominent figure in the Bible, and not just in *The Da Vinci Code*, especially as the first to have witnessed the resurrection, which appears to be the main criterion. Webb's question is actually relevant and valid, given the fact

that Paul was an apostle despite not meeting all the criteria in today's passage. For example, he was not with Jesus in life. He 'met' the risen Lord only during his famous 'Damascus experience'.

Second, today's passage is particularly important because of what is happening in the Church and in our world. For example, there are people who call themselves Apostles, or who are being referred to as Apostles, but it is possible that they are not aware of the biblical basis and contexts of this office of the Church.

Furthermore, electing, appointing, and selecting people to lead us in our churches and in our countries are very much part of modern life. Despite the flaws in the criteria, the manner in which the selection was made in the passage is quite admirable. They prayed before they cast lots, which appears to be quite fair and objective, though human ingenuity can easily corrupt any system that we develop.

More critically, however, is how the passage reminds us about how biblical texts have shaped our worldviews. Many do not realise that so much of what we do and say today can find their origins in these ancient texts. For instance, the much-loved practice of the father giving away his daughter at marriage is rooted in Middle Eastern tradition that we read about in the Bible, where a daughter is a property of the father and ownership is transferred to her husband during marriage. And I would argue that the same can be said about the marginalisation of woman.

In pre-Christian Samoa, a sister enjoyed a sacred status within her family. She was God's agent; she was revered, honoured and protected; a brother had to lay down his life, if required, for his sister. She was referred to as the *Feagaiga*; a covenant figure representing God in her family. After the Church had arrived, the honour of the *Feagaiga* was transferred to the minister, usually a white male, and the sister as the *tama sa* (sacred child) has lost much of her honour and prestige.

Webb has argued that much of the marginalisation of women over time is due to how Eve has been interpreted. Perhaps, but Eve is not a historical figure and she was only related to her partner, Adam. Mary Magdalen, on the other hand, is a historical figure and she was a member of a bigger society and a fellowship of men and women, the early Church. That means the elevation of Matthias over Mary Magdalene is significant when we look at the history of the Church and Western society and their treatment of women.

When I first broke down Peter's selection criteria into three criteria, I literally cringed! I quietly told myself, 'my goodness...this is where the marginalisation of women all began!'.

But we need to keep things in perspective. These men and women were people of their own time. We live in a different time, and we still have Jesus' word of life to guide us in our faith journeys. And I believe Paul had a better understanding of God's purposes and Jesus' mind when he wrote to the churches in Galatia: 'So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:26, 28).

For the glory of God. Amen.