

“Discovering God’s Will”

24 January 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 25 Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 1:15-26

Sermon:

When we are young, well-meaning relations will say, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” In primary school I would have answered that by saying an astronaut, having been enthralled by the Apollo space missions. In secondary school I would have said a vet, but then I discovered that straight A grades were required, and I thought maybe not. Of course, your life’s work is a big decision or a series of decisions. And we know that certain decisions carry more weight than others, determining the direction of one’s life. Decisions such as following the Lord Jesus or what work to do are incredibly significant; others like what soccer team to support, what to have for dinner or where to go on holiday are less so. Certain decisions are important pivotal moments and consequences flow from them.

As Christians within the Church, we desire to please God, to follow His rules, to be in relationship with Him and with each other. So it is particularly important, indeed vital, that we consider what God’s thoughts are on any issue and make decisions in light with His thoughts. Therefore, it is important that we do our best to understand what the will of God is in any matter that requires a decision.

The pandemic has stopped us in our tracks, so to speak. Our activities are limited and our interaction with each other is only virtual. Added to this, our building is empty and we are not engaging in any mission activity at present. Considering the pause enforced upon us, we, that is the church - elders, leaders, and members - have begun to ask, “What are we to be doing post-Covid when the restrictions are lifted?” The Acts of the Apostles have reminded us that a period of transition or change is an important time, a time for prayer and reflection. As we rejoin the early church, they are in this period of waiting and prayer, but they are not static; they are getting ready for the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is my prayer that this passage, Acts 1:15-26, will help us in the decisions we must make as we see how they discovered the will of God, now that Jesus had left.

For them, it was what to do with the legacy of Judas who had betrayed Jesus, and our section today is the final piece of preparation before the coming of the Holy Spirit. They received their commission to build the Kingdom of God (v.6-8), they saw Jesus ascend, and understood Jesus had left to complete the hand over to them, impressing on them to not stand gazing into the sky but to wait for the Holy Spirit and His power to continue Jesus’ ministry (v.9-12). They gathered for prayer asking for the power of the Holy Spirit, the power to be a Christian and live the Christian life within the community of the Church. Now, they replace Judas with Matthias to bring the number of apostles back to twelve. How and why they made that decision is significant and a good template for how we should make decisions. Let’s work through these verses..

I. Leadership (v.15): Peter led the Church.

Leadership is a gift given to the Church by God (Romans 12:8). It follows a principle of headship in the body image, which in the Presbyterian Church is administered through elders. The early church was led by Peter: *“he stood up among the believers”*. Jesus had indicated he would be the leader (Matthew 16:19 - Keys of the Kingdom, John 21:15ff - reinstatement and commission to feed the sheep, the training he received in being part of Jesus’ inner circle with James and John). Leadership is important in decision making. Elders have responsibility to consider the direction of the Church. This is communicated to the membership of the church (the 120) by Peter. Membership of the church includes those who are believers, spoken of in the Greek word *brothers*, which is a composite term that includes sisters, highlighting the spiritual familial relationship. In a healthy family, this relationship with leadership and members is open, honest and respectful.

II. Honesty (v.16-19): Acknowledge the issue and consider it openly.

Peter speaks of Judas. He honestly acknowledges that Judas *“served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus.”* I sometimes feel sorry for Judas, as I know others do, but the honest assessment by Peter is that Judas did something awful, inherently evil, and is responsible for it. But perhaps more remarkable is that he acknowledges that Judas was part of the Apostles and shared in their ministry. There is a tacit acknowledgement of his participation - *“he was one of our number”* - and involvement - *“and shared in this ministry”*. We can only surmise how difficult it had been for the apostles to comprehend Judas’ action.

Luke recognises that his readers will not be fully acquainted with the life of Judas, so he fills in some details in v.18-19. It is important to note they are *not* part of Peter’s speech. Luke fills in details of the outcome (or reward) Judas received for the decision he made to betray Jesus when he acted as a guide for those who arrested Jesus, which resulted in Jesus’ death on the cross. There is some discrepancy with the account given by Matthew (27:1-10), which has generated a lot of debate; and yet, they can be reconciled as two independent accounts of the same event, emphasising different aspects.

Please note that Peter is honest, but he does not gloat about the outcome of Judas’ decision. Leadership within the church means dealing with the reality of the past and the difficult situations, honestly and with sympathy.

III. Be Biblical (v.16, v.20): Search the Scriptures.

Recently, I wanted to forward an email account to my Gmail account. So, I asked Katie, who, to my surprise, consulted Google. The transfer was successful; the only problem was I ended up with 486 emails in my inbox! I chose Katie because she is proficient at IT; still, she consulted the authority for Gmail, which is Google. This is why it is important that Church elders know the Scriptures, prioritise reading and understanding them and use the authority of the Scriptures to guide the Church. Members are not passive in this process, for we must test for the biblical truth of what is being suggested. Perhaps the bigger question for all of us is, *“Do we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture to do that and speak to the situations we face?”* Sadly, sermons don’t always connect with life and the application is not always well thought through. I acknowledge that application is the most important and difficult part of any teaching and we - minister, elders, Sunday School teachers, 3D leaders - always value your prayers as we think through application.

Peter turns to the Scriptures (Old Testament) and finds in his reading (probably in discussion with the other Apostles and others) references in the Psalms to one who acted like Judas, who betrayed King David. The references, of course, are about David and his enemies, but the use of words and images fits very well with the betrayal of Judas to the Lord, the Anointed King in the line of David. So, the Scriptures are used to direct their path, in this case quite specifically answering the question about replacing Judas. I want to recognise the dangers of lifting verses out of context; that is why it is important to have leaders who correctly handle the Word of God and to be prepared to discuss and think things through with each other.

IV. Common Sense (v.21-26): Applied principles and thoughts about the role of the Apostle.

God has clearly indicated to the Apostles that Judas should be replaced and so they act in obedience. The question is, how do they know who to choose? What they do is set criteria for shortlisting; these are what John Stott calls common sense. An Apostle needs to be a man who has been involved and active with Jesus since the beginning of His ministry until the end, including being a witness of the resurrection. Of course, this makes great sense, indicating they would have known Jesus, listened to His teaching, been known by the Apostles and to some extent proven. (We know nothing in Scripture about these men, but Eusebius, an early Church historian, says they were part of the 70 who were sent out on mission by Jesus.) They proposed two men who filled the criteria (v.23), one was a man with three names - Joseph, Barsabbas (Hebrew) or Justus (Latin) - and Matthias. Ultimately, the original twelve were chosen by Jesus (Luke 6:12-16) and the text indicates that the Apostles, through the mechanism of casting lots (a biblically sanctioned way of making decisions in the Old Testament) ask the Lord Jesus to choose between these two. There has been criticism of the Apostles for using lots, but Luke is silent on the matter and after the coming of the Holy Spirit this method is not used again.

This may raise many questions in your minds, and if so do ask them, but I want to highlight the point that we use common sense. We think in line with Scripture and the direction God leads us. Let me illustrate that with the example of Jonah, about the misuse of common sense. Jonah doesn't like the Ninevites; he realises mission there is difficult and may result in his death. So, he decides to sail away to Tarshish, and when he goes to the port, it just so happens there is a boat available. It has a space, he has the money and the captain agrees to his passage. That is circumstantial, common sense, and he might say, "That must be God's will." We might say, "I feel God saying . . . I had a vision. Everything worked out. A friend advised me . . ."

We must be very cautious of all of these types of influence in making decisions; they must be tested against the Word of God and the Word of God for Jonah was clear and unequivocal. The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, "*Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it*". We understand the direction or direct instruction of the Word of God and then we think through application using common sense, *not the other way around*. Taking the advice of other Christians who direct us to the Word of God is helpful. Please don't struggle on your own; that is what the family of God is for (and 3D groups can help).

V. Prayer (v.24): The Lord knows everyone's heart.

The prayer is simple but profound, and the idea that God knows the heart of everyone is wonderful. Discerning the heart is important. It is easy to be deceived, for example, but perhaps more importantly two people may meet the same criteria and be able to do well, but God knows more. He understands what is needed, how they will grow - He knows everyone's heart. Ministry experience tells me that the heart of an individual is such an important characteristic, and though we can have pointers, we can be deceived. We do not really know the potential or otherwise for good or ill. We need the Lord's help; we look for His choice, His will, which Paul assures us is good, pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2).

I sincerely believe we are in a period of prayerful waiting upon the Lord, asking Him to fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit and I encourage us to engage with God over the decisions we face in ARPC over the coming months. Let us face the reality of our situation; let us encourage our leaders to lead us biblically; let us use this time to think through the situation we face and have discussion; let us inform and discuss with one another; and let us engage in prayer specifically about all that we face. **Be honest, be biblical, be thinking, be prayerful.**

Maybe I can finish with saying how wonderfully exciting that prospect is of deeply engaging with God and learning in relationship with Him and each other in church, discerning His will and knowing His blessing. Let's pray about:

- the administration handover with Stuart leaving at the end of February. Ray has assumed responsibility to understand the roles and we should pray for others to fill various roles, particularly treasurer.
- decisions about mission in our now empty building. The elders will be discussing this in early February.
- the relocation of the manse to one that will meet the needs of the minister and his family and be strategic for mission.
- our integration with each other more effectively.
- the future of our work with children and youth.

Let us be honest, biblical, thinking, and prayerful.

Praise: Speak, O Lord

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: IPH 491 Be Thou My Vision

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen.

Discussion & Application:

Discuss a decision you've recently made or currently face, considering the teaching of this passage.

What biblical principles would you use in thinking about the mission of ARPC?

Choose one upcoming decision in ARPC to pray for.