

Acts 1:15-17

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) ¹⁶ and said, "Brothers and sisters,^{16a} the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ He was one of our number and shared in our ministry."

Acts 1:21-26

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²² beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

²³ So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." ²⁶ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

1 John 5:9-13

We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. ¹⁰ Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Witness

Right at the start of Acts, straight after the events of Pentecost we find Peter, the acknowledged leader of the apostles organising the Christians to choose a new apostle, a new member of the twelve. Why was this necessary?

We know Judas had betrayed Jesus, and gone and hung himself. But why should someone be appointed as a new apostle? What did they all gain by that? And were his credentials real?

Part of what has tended to confuse *me* here is the way that the synoptic gospels focus their attention on the disciples as the key followers of Jesus, such that, following their camera-angles (as it were) we notice them, but not other faces in the crowd. We know of Peter, James, John, Thomas, Andrew, Matthew, Judas (the other one), Simon the Zealot and so on. But we are less aware of this wider crowd of people who followed Jesus through the three years or so of his ministry. Our assumptions hide the extent to which Jesus had a wide following.

But we know about Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. They were good enough friends that Jesus deliberately visits them for a meal, that Mary is willing to anoint his feet and wipe them with her hair, and that Jesus weeps with the sisters when Lazarus dies before raising him from the dead. We know about Mary Magdalene as the main leader of a number of women who followed Jesus — and that Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Christ. We know that Nicodemus meets Jesus early in John's gospel and is there at the end when he must be buried. We can infer Nicodemus's ongoing discipleship between those points (and faith afterwards), even if he is only around when Jesus was in Jerusalem. There was Joseph of Arimathea, too. Who would offer his own tomb if he were not already a faithful follower? I've also recently read a powerful argument that the author of John's gospel was not the brother of James, but another John, known as John the Elder. So that's another follower not among the twelve.

And why shouldn't Jesus have had a very broad following? We know Jesus was hugely impactful right from the beginning. Crowds came out to see him all over the place. Many of those who saw him and witnessed his teaching and his miracles believed in him at least to some extent, even if they did not understand all of who he was. There were many who perhaps could not literally follow him everywhere – who had mouths to feed and jobs to hold down – but perhaps while he was in Galilee, as he often was, they attended everything nearby.

And all of this is to argue that though we hadn't heard of Matthias or Justus Barsabbas, we must trust that they were, in fact, close followers of Jesus throughout his ministry, and receiving the authority to be an official witness would have encouraged and empowered Matthias to share his story through the early church, evangelising, witnessing and discipling to great effect – even if Acts then maintains its focus on the activities of Peter and Paul.

Eyewitness testimony was of fundamental importance. There were not photographs or video of the events. For anyone to know who Jesus was and what he had been doing, they needed to be there, or to trust an eyewitness.

The Greeks and the Romans had pioneered historiography – you may think of Herodotus, or Livy or Josephus, a Jewish writer for the Romans. Such writers knew that their accounts only stood up if they were themselves eye-witnesses, or had interviewed such witnesses.

I recently finished reading a great book that argued for the gospels being written to the highest standards of historiography of the time, and that their presentation of names throughout was their act of implicit citation of their sources – an invitation to contemporaneous readers to fact check them by visiting such figures as Zacchaeus in Jericho, or Nicodemus in Jerusalem, to hear their stories first hand.

Again, I say all this to remind you just how important it was to hear the remarkable stories of Jesus from people who had actually been there and who could guarantee that they were telling the truth of what happened. This was especially true of the most important moments – the crucifixion and resurrection, and Jesus's appearances after his resurrection. It was the work of the disciples – and then the other less well known wider circle of believers to talk to everyone about everything they had seen, and to report accurately all the things their friends had seen, so that people might know. Matthias might not appear again in Acts, but he would have been very important in simply getting the word out.

Now, what are we to do with this academic exercise? I hope I may have offered you some reassurance about how trustworthy the gospels are. Perhaps simply thinking about the way story is transmitted has widened your thought about how the good news was spread in a world without video, photos, electronic or print media.

But perhaps, too, you have realised that you too are still a witness to Jesus's redeeming work. You may not be an eyewitness to Jesus's actions of 2000 years ago, but it is likely you can speak of God's action in your life, and the significance faith has for you. Some people have dramatic stories – I've known people who have been dramatically healed, and I know of a former armed robber who has similarly changed.

Most of us don't have such stories – but we *can* report our own experience. What brought you to faith? Have you experienced God working in your life? What prayers have been answered? We can be terribly modest, and dislike boasting – but it is a different thing entirely to speak of what God has done for you. You could speak of the feeling you have when you pray, the peace you have received in prayer, or indeed the small miracles and healings you may have known. Or at least the people you know who received such healing.

The gospel was spread quickly and powerfully in the first century through the sharing of eyewitness testimony, powered by the Holy Spirit preparing the way. The gospel is *still* spread

this way for the most part. Let us pray that our influence will lead others towards a joyful and lively faith in the Lord.

Prayer:

Lord these are difficult times in which to talk of faith. We pray that you would change the times, make it easier to talk of faith and salvation, and give us the confidence to do this, at the right time for the right person. Amen.