

Just Do It

Sermon for the 7th Sunday of Easter, The Sunday after Ascension Day –
12th May 2024

Readings [Acts 1.15-17, 21-end](#); [John 17.6-19](#)

Mohammed Elneny (known as Mo) and Karl Hein; two names you may not know, even if you follow the doings of Arsenal Football Club. They are likely to be among the substitutes for the must-win visit to Manchester United this afternoon. And that's the position of the two people in our first reading: Joseph (called Barsabbas, also known as Justus) and Matthias are on the apostolic subs' bench.

As a substitute, you may be brought on, play a crucial part in the match, make a name for yourself; or you may remain that unglamorous thing, a squad player, the answer to an obscure question in a future pub quiz.

It doesn't matter how many names Joseph has, no-one is going to remember him. Matthias will fare a bit better – it's his feast day on Tuesday – but he's hardly in the Peter-James-and-John league.

The important thing, though, is the team, having a full complement on the field of play: seven, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, whatever you sport requires. With Jesus' disciples, a full team numbers twelve, one for each of the tribes of Israel, and when we meet them in the gospel reading, they are a man down. Judas has gone out into the night, and Jesus has been talking to the rest before he 'goes away' from them to his death.

What's the final thing you should do to prepare your team for a big test?

In the 2009 film *The Damned United*, there is a scene [[link here](#); one instance of strong language and one of discriminatory language] in the dressing room of the young Derby County team with their manager Brian Clough (played uncannily by Michael Sheen) just before he sends them on to the field against the all-conquering Leeds United (this was half a century ago). They are all there, team and training staff. He speaks quietly to a couple of players, nods to his captain, and then just stands there, saying nothing, surveying the room. The tension grows. Then – release. He claps his hands, shouts, 'Come on!' and they burst out onto the pitch.

Jesus is sending his disciples into the hostile environment of the world, and the final thing he does is to *pray* for them. He prays for his Father to protect them, to 'sanctify them in the truth' and bring them joy.

That is a distinctive thing about church. You can make friends here, do enjoyable stuff, but there's no shortage of other places offering that on a Sunday. Where else, though, will you find people to pray for you if you are facing some big test? Who knows what challenges wait for some of us this week? We need each other's prayers; as do other people, who are not here.

The places and causes come to mind at once: people in Gaza; Kharkiv; Kagera, where a climate in distress has brought acute floods. This is the first day of [Christian Aid Week](#), and today is day four in [Thy Kingdom Come](#), a project for the period between Ascension Day and Pentecost in which we are invited to pray for people we care about who do not yet share Christian faith, that they may know in their lives the one who 'is our joy and strong defence', as our first hymn put it.

Does that sound presumptuous, even manipulative? The least manipulative thing you can do is pray for someone. If I speak to you, or do something for you, my motives might be very mixed; but if I pray for you, we can trust God to sift the wheat from the chaff in the prayer I pray.

So Jesus prays for his friends. Then he does go away from them, to his death. And then comes Easter, those wonderful, scary encounters with the risen Jesus, when they discover that he has been given back to them. When we meet them again, in the Acts reading, those encounters have ended. Jesus has in a sense gone away from them again – that's the story of the Ascension of Jesus, which the church celebrated on Thursday.

They are still a man down – Judas has now died – and they have another big test ahead of them, to bear witness to this new possibility for the world that God has created by raising Jesus from the dead. So they need a full apostolic team. They are all there: Mary the mother of Jesus, women followers, men followers, and Peter gives the two-point person spec for the new twelfth apostle.

First, he must be a man. (Jesus chose twelve men, because in those days men were the heads of families and, almost always, leaders in society. Led, many of us believe, by the Holy Spirit, we do things differently now: so at our Confirmation service next month we shall welcome Sarah, our 133rd – and first female – Bishop of London.)

Secondly, it has to be someone who has been part of things from the start of Jesus' ministry. Two people meet the requirements: the man with three names, and Matthias. After prayer and a lottery, Matthias gets the nod.

Two things to note about him.

First, we don't hear anything about what we'd call a personal sense of vocation, beyond being a follower of Jesus. I find this interesting. Nowadays, if you offer yourself for public ministry, the church will probe what the official language calls your 'internal sense of call'. But our man hears no voice, 'Matthias, I'm choosing you'. A job needs doing, he has what's needed, his name comes out of the hat, and that's enough.

When God calls us, God gives us the pointers we need, not always the ones we want. So if you wait for a Damascus-road vision about what you should do with your life – let alone what you should do this Summer – you could have a long wait. Sometimes God does it that way. Often, it seems, God orders things differently: a thing needs doing, and you are in a position to do it. That inner sense may come later; but for now, you have what it takes, so Just Do It. (Theologians call this the Nike Doctrine.)

The second point about our new apostle we have noted: he is Matthias the Obscure. No matter, though. He needs to be there, and without him something will be missing. It's like in a choir: when all are singing together, you don't pick out a particular voice; but without that voice something will be lacking.

Sometimes the call of God is to do or be something that everyone will notice; nothing wrong with that. But it may be that God is calling you to do or be something significant but hidden (like the people who put together your notice sheet or the hidden hand that keeps the slides rolling on our screens). And that matters too.

Nearly half a century before *The Damned United* came the Oscar-winning film *A Man for All Seasons*, based on Robert Bolt's play about Thomas More, who for three fateful years was Henry VIII's right-hand man. More has a young friend called Richard Rich, who wants a big, prestige job. Thomas thinks Rich should be a teacher [[link here](#)].

'You'd be a fine teacher,' he says, 'perhaps, a great one.'

'And if I was,' says Rich, 'who would know it?'

'You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that.'

Rich isn't persuaded, alas for both of them.

What has God put me in this world for? That, in all seasons of life, is the question, and saying Yes to God is what matters. And if saying Yes means doing something that no-one really notices except God? God, who brought about this universe we

inhabit; God, whose eyes we shall look into at the end of time. If no-one notices but God, that's not a bad audience to have.