

Readings:

- Acts 1: 15 -17 & 21 to end (Good News Bible)
- John 17: 6 – 19 (Good News Bible)

Today I want to talk about the importance of belonging in our faith and the difference with being chosen and the importance of accents

Both readings today are sandwiched in between major events. The reading from John is Jesus' final words to his disciples at the Last Supper, just before his arrest. With Acts the choosing of Judas' replacement is just after the ascension and before Pentecost.

When I was about 11, I lived in New Orleans in America for a year or so. My classmates used to call me "Englishman" because of my accent, which was a little annoying. It was even more annoying when I moved back to the UK and because of trace of an American accent everyone then called me "Yank". In the US I eventually come to feel I belonged a bit and made some friends but I'm afraid that was only because It is very hot in New Orleans and I was the only one to have a nice swimming pool in my garden & these so-called friends wanted a swim!

And I never got into Jimmy Herschel's gang – still remember the name. They didn't do anything wild just hung out together. It was just the status - I desperately wanted to belong to it and drove my parents mad going on and on about it but with my accent I didn't fit in so was rejected

All of us want to be part of a group, to be loved and appreciated by others, to be part of something bigger than ourselves. we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval. As the writer Brené Brown says " If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in." Belonging is being accepted for being you with all your idiosyncrasies. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else."

And in the US my English accent was a problem

We do this all the time. We want to belong, and we settle for "fitting in."

At All Saints we need to have a church where everyone – even if very different to us- can belong so we look a bit like this, but we must resist the need for them to "fit in". We call ourselves a family at church because we all belong to Jesus and one another despite the crazy, stupid, difficult people that we all are at times.



Jesus' time with his disciples in the Upper Room after the Last Supper must have been a solemn occasion. In the gathering gloom Jesus gives his final message.

Imagine Jesus last words reverberating round the room. How it will have resonated with them when they looked back on it with what came next .

The first key message from Jesus to his disciples in John is one of affirmation support, protection and care. It is an incredibly powerful message of love in effectively his final will and testament to them and he is speaking that same message to every one of you right here today. You've all asked Him into your life at one time or other. So, you all belong, however you might feel. You are in the club, you've made it, you are loved by the Creator himself. Quite simply you are in Jesus' gang, and what's more he's saved you and you will go to Heaven when you die.

His second message is to stress how much his disciples belong to him and do not belong to the world. But he doesn't tell them to retreat and become hermits he tells them to spread the message and be a light for him in the context and times they are in. We are still in the world. We don't form our own sub-cultures or ghettos to avoid the world.

We have to be accessible, and approachable to those in the world in normal, ordinary ways as colleagues, teammates and friends but we also have to be different. To belong to Jesus requires the courage to be different, to be like Jesus, actually for the sake of the world. And to belong to Jesus sets us free to be in the world, where people need us, where God needs us, but we don't have to succumb to the false gods which many people in our societies are enslaved.

I always think the best analogy about this is to take the random example of the ambassador of Turkmenistan He speaks perfect English with all the latest slang, knows how to hail a taxi and the ins and outs of living in London. Mr Seryaev is not British (his name is a clue) and his mission is to represent Turkmenistan in Britain and he speaks with a Turkmenistan accent.

And that is what Jesus expects of us - to be in this world but representing Him.

We have to talk with a Christian accent

We have to engage in messy discipleship is when we risk getting dirty for the sake of Christ. We have difficult decisions to make at work and in our families. But we are to bear the marks of his kingdom, and of his kingship. This effects the way that we think, the way that we speak, and the things that we do.

Now perhaps we can see why Jesus in this prayer does not pray for the world but for his disciples. It is because he is at this point entrusting the disciples with his own mission to the world and he entrusts that to us now as a community of Christians.

BEING CHOSEN

I also want to say a few words about being chosen But remember we all belong whatever happens and we've already made it whatever God wants to do with us as we journey on. You have already been chosen by Jesus to be in his gang.

But what about being chosen for different jobs or tasks in our faith. In Acts they were choosing between Matthias and Barsabbas to replace Judas Iscariot.

Matthias may not have imagined that he would ever be a part of the plan of God in a greater measure. But it shows that unexpectedly you may be thrust into the limelight. Because Matthias had been faithful in the past ultimately, he was chosen for a major role.

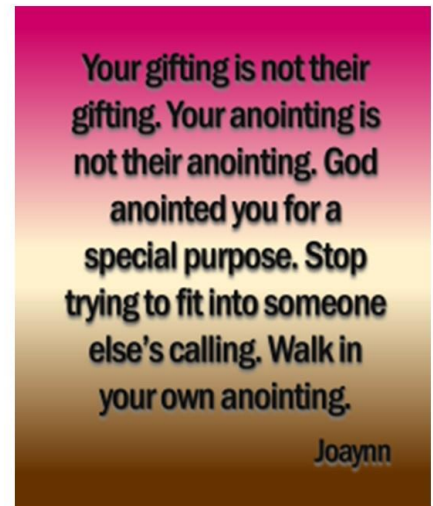


But what happened to the loser? Can you imagine Barsabbas' original excitement? The honour? The opportunity.? The plans that must have run through his head? Then just like that, he is rejected and Matthias is selected. His dreams were dashed, his plans were laid waste

Ever been disappointed not just in church but in your wider life? Ever been overlooked? Ever been hurt and rejected? Of course you have; we all have. But how do you plan to deal with it? Leave? Withdraw? Or will you continue to be a faithful disciple of Jesus? How will the "rest of the story" be written for you.

43 years ago, I put myself forward to be the Social and Mission secretary, of a very large Ecumenical group at University. Against me was a chap called Richard who had done wonders at his local church in his youth and done a lot during the first year of University. Against all the odds I got the role. I'll never forget the look of disbelief and disappointment on his face. I thought it was because of the good pitch I had done. Later I found out a friend on the committee was far more influential than I realised and had sweet talked the rest of them into selecting me. My first introduction into the murky world of politics! I like to think I had a good year but always wondered why God had allowed that to happen.

So, what happened to Barsabbus. He didn't withdraw, he remained as a faithful soldier of Christ and God anointed him for a special purpose as shown in the slide. He went on to become the Bishop of Eleutheropolis, a thriving and important Roman city known as the "City of the Free". His patience was rewarded and his disappointment taken away as he went on to play a very important role for God.



If you properly belong in a Christian fellowship prepare to be chosen at any time and prepare to be not chosen at any time as things just change – to be furloughed if you like and not get hung up on things either way.

You might be chosen in other, perhaps unexpected ways, most of us have done different things at different times in the church. You are more important to God's plan than you will ever realize. There are things you can do that no one else can do. You may not even have a speaking part, but there are some things that will put you in God's "hall of fame" that others may not immediately recognize, like the way you listen, encourage, sympathise or help in an unseen way. To take a family example of this, it might be Great Uncle Robert who does nothing else all year, but who is the only one that can defuse family tensions at Christmas with some of his awful jokes.

So, in summary first of all we don't just fit in we belong to Jesus. We are in Jesus' gang. He has a message of perfect love for us and he is behind and with us every step of the way.

He also trusts us to be his ambassadors here on earth however messy that gets for us and speak with a Christian accent encouraging others to belong however different they are. Once we belong as Christians we can be chosen or not chosen for different tasks at various times, never get hung up about it as you each have a unique contribution to make.

Oh finally

Whatever happened to Richard who incidentally is also my friend now? Well, the Right Revd Richard Atkinson OBE is now Bishop of Bedford and in a curious twist of fate, our Nigel Richards' new boss