

A witness to the resurrection

Acts 1:12-26

Introduction

Today we will think about the importance of those early witnesses to the resurrection and what that means for us.

Ending or beginning

The story of Judas Iscariot is tragic. He went down in history as the man who sold out his friend, our saviour Jesus, for a bag of silver. From this point Judas' life spiralled away from God. The other disciples, including Peter, had let Jesus down and had started to spiral away from God but in true repentance they turned back to God.

All the disciples had failed Jesus at his time of need (though John and the women stood by as he was crucified); nevertheless they all shared a common sense of failure. Yet Jesus invited them back and by repentance and faith each returned to the risen Jesus ready for the next step, completely assured of God's love and their acceptance and forgiveness.

I am a fan of the Yorkshireman Smith Wigglesworth, one of the Fathers of the Pentecostal movement. He was a plumber by trade and taught to read by his wife Polly, but powerful in the Spirit. In his short book 'Faith that Prevails', he talks to failing souls and encourages them with these words.

If you ever stop at any point, pick up at the point where you have dropped through, and begin again under the refining light and the power of heaven and God will meet you. And while he will bring you to a consciousness of your own frailty and brokenness of spirit, your faith will lay hold of him and all the divine resources; his light and compassion will be manifested through you, and he will send the rain. (Wigglesworth 1936: 15)

As we re-gather, we have opportunity to be renewed by all of God's 'divine resources'. Judas symbolised a cold, closed future; the other disciples believed that Jesus had risen from the grave and put their trust in him and therefore the future was open.

Casting lots

A lot happens between chapter 1 and 2 of Acts, in chapter 1 the disciples are still employing external means to deduce the will of God. They choose two possible men, Joseph and Matthias, prayed and then cast lots to discover whom God had chosen. It might sound surprising, but two things are worth noting. Firstly, casting lots isn't out of place for the Jewish believers.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. (Proverbs 11:33)

Secondly, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit hadn't happened yet. Only after Pentecost do the believers begin to feel and sense God's leading by the indwelling Spirit as individuals and importantly for us as a Baptist community. The disciples did what they could and that was the most important thing.

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The disciples had returned to God and they had prayed about the role that Judas had filled, then they selected two to decide between them.

²¹Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²²beginning 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.**' (Acts 1:21-22)

What struck me from today's reading was the hopefulness of the disciples. If it had been me, not them, selecting, I would have said 'one of these must become a witness with us of his crucifixion', that brutal but necessary means of our atonement from sin. That would not have been wrong, and no doubt heads would have solemnly nodded in agreement. Yet God's Holy Spirit wanted to open the path before them to focus on the resurrection, the victory of Jesus over sin and death. They focus not on their failing but on God's victory in Christ. The Apostle Paul exuberantly claims regarding the resurrection:

Then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

⁵⁵ 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)

As the early church was about to embark on a new Spirit-filled life, they turned their attention to the resurrection and all the promise within it.

Conclude

As we open the book of Acts we will learn a lot, some of it will be expected and some cause us to rethink and refocus. For now, let's be witnesses to the resurrection.

Questions

1. What do you think of Smith Wigglesworth's "get it of your chest and get on with it" approach to faith and God?
2. Prayer was an important aspect of selecting the disciple to take Judas' place. Can you remember a time that prayer helped you make an important decision in your own life?
3. How can we, the church, witness to the resurrection in both word and action?