

This past Thursday was Ascension

Day, what is called in German "Christi Himmelfahrt," Christ's Travel to Heaven; and next Sunday is Pentecost. Ascension Day falls on a Thursday because, according to Church tradition, it was forty days after Easter that the disciples saw ~~with~~ the risen Jesus for the last time. It was not a sad parting, because he told them that he was returning to God, and they knew that from then on the Jesus whom they knew and loved was reigning throughout the universe.

But it was bewildering. Now that he had gone, what were they supposed to do? The answer came ten days later, when, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon them with such power that they knew that now they were the new Body of Christ on earth and were enabled by his Spirit to continue his reconciling ministry and declare

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the Good News of God's love. The rest of the New Testament is a record of how they went about ^{that} this task, a task that is still ours, as the inheritors of Pentecost and members of that apostolic Church.

So next Sunday we shall celebrate that great festival of the birth of the Church, which is the climax of the Christian Year.

We will do it as God rekindles the Holy Spirit in two members of our Confirmation class, who will reaffirm the vows made at their baptism.

Today I want to think with you about that curious interim, the ten days when the disciples, breathless from the tremendous events of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, were drifting on a strange sea, like survivors of a shipwreck--enormously thankful, but rudderless and lost. Jesus had told them to be his "witnesses," but what did that mean, and how were they to go about it without his

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physical presence? Jesus had told them,
"You will receive power." But there was
nothing very powerful about the little group
of men who slipped back into Jerusalem and
made their way to that upper room of a
house where Mary, the mother of Jesus, and
other women were waiting for them. They
were sure that their Lord was with his Father
in heaven, but what, on earth, were they to
do? Something must be going to happen.
But what? and how? and when?

That "in between" time of ten days
was a period of bewilderment and
expectation: bewilderment because they
hadn't yet digested the meaning of what they
took to be appearances of Jesus; and
expectation because they had his promises
that something wonderful was going to
happen. ~~Perhaps some of you have the same~~
~~feeling.~~

What did the disciples do during those

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days? The strange-answer of our text, in the first chapter of the Book of Acts, is -- they prayed and rolled dice. I'm not suggesting, of course, that when they got tired of praying they whiled away the hours with a game of craps. By "dice" I am referring to the drawing of lots to decide which of two candidates should get the place of Judas among the apostles. But, as I read this passage, the combination of fervent prayer to God and the throw of dice fascinated me. In our minds, there is a huge gap between the exercise of prayer and the settling of a practical question in a very practical way. And for us, there is something irreconcilable between seeking God's guidance in prayer and the tossing of a coin.

Well, what about these prayers? We are told that "all these were constantly at prayer together, and with them a group of women, including Mary the mother of Jesus,

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and his brothers." This seems to us perfectly natural: of course, during that tense interim, these disciples would pray. We take it for granted. That's just the trouble. In church-circles it is almost automatic. Whenever a church-group gets together, whatever the business, somebody--usually the minister--is expected to "open with prayer," as we say. It's like blowing a whistle to say: "Hey! This is a church meeting." How serious are we on those occasions?

And when a minister, who is supposed to be ready-with-a-prayer at the drop of a hat, is asked to give an invocation at a public dinner or celebration of some sort, what is he really doing? I remember once feeling-like standing at the podium in dead silence for a while and then saying something like: "Do you really want to set yourselves in the conscious presence of Almighty God right now, and do you honestly believe that God's

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presence is infinitely more important than that of your most distinguished guest?"

Prayer, like so much else in our Christian tradition, has often been secularized and sanitized, with its real power and meaning drained away.

The lay theologian Jacques Ellul, in the French Reformed Church, once recommended that we stop opening church-meetings with prayer until such time as all-present really believe in the presence of an active, answering God.

Well, what exactly did these disciples do when "they were constantly in prayer?" Were they spending hours-together simply crying out, "God, show us what to do; show us what to do?" I believe that part of their prayers-at this time would have been simply sharing in the normal routine of the religion in which they had been raised. That would mean that they probably went to the Temple-

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every day and shared in the worship, as well as repeating-together prayers they had learned from childhood. It is true that regularly repeated prayers can become empty and meaningless at times, but it is precisely in moments of stress, like this tense, "in between" time, that we fall back on the routine--and it suddenly becomes a source of strength and spiritual power. It is clear in this chapter that the disciples were reaching back into their religious traditions. They kept quoting the Old Testament Scriptures, to find ways to interpret the strange things that had happened when Jesus came. They used the ancient psalms to express the new-Gospel that was dawning on them. Yes, their prayers had roots; and we, too, can know the value of regular habits of prayer- and worship, when the time comes for us to go through one of these interims of strain and tension.

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But I believe there was also much spontaneous prayer in that upper room. Much of it, I'm sure, was sheer praise and adoration. These people were learning, as we all have to, that prayer is not just an emergency-call to a rescuing God, but an opening of our whole lives to the divine Presence. Does that make prayer some kind of mysticism? Yes, if by that you mean an experience anyone can have of realizing that our material life is surrounded and penetrated by the holy, and we can experience the present power and love of God and respond to God's mysterious will.

They prayed, and they heard each other pray. I can't imagine that Peter's prayers were like John's, or James's prayers were like those of the Lord's mother. There's something fortifying about Christians hearing one another pray.

But then, on one of those days,

probably when they were praying together in the Temple (I can't see "a hundred and twenty" fitting into that upper room), Peter drew their attention to a piece of unfinished business. He pointed out that the defection of Judas had left a gap in the body of twelve apostles, and somebody had to be elected in his place.

Yes, believe it or not, already in that strange interim, the Church was getting organized. Some consider "organization" to be a dirty word, today, in connection with religion. Many seem to think that a Church must be purely "spiritual"--whatever that means. But just as Jesus had a body and was, like us, part of the body politic, so his Church had to be formed and shaped and organized to fulfill his mission in this material world. It is evident ^{from} for this passage that great importance was attached to this "college of apostles." There had originally

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reminds

been twelve, reminding them of the twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve they had to be.

But not just any replacement would do. They needed to select someone who had been with them "during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among [them], beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from [them]."

Here we see the beginning of the historic episcopate, the concern that Church leaders be people who could pass on the teachings of Jesus and the traditions about him accurately to the next generation, or who at least stand symbolically in the succession of people who had been doing that, all the way back to the apostles.

There were two names in nomination, Joseph Barsabbas and Mathias. My guess is that these were the only two names to emerge, and the group may have been evenly divided in support of each of them. The

shock to us comes with the method of
resolving the tie between these two men.

What happened? It's clearly recorded:

"Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take ^{the} ~~the~~ place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Mathias; and he was added to the eleven apostles."

"They cast lots." The custom was to write names on a piece of clay and put them in a pot, which was then shaken till one fell out. The practice was common in Old Testament times. It was by lot, according to one account, that Saul was chosen king of Israel. The High Priest had a buckler on his vestments that contained the mysterious Urim and Thummim, which seemed to have been a kind of sacred lot or dice, which were used for making big decisions. It is interesting that, apart from this story about

the apostles, there is no trace of the Christian Church continuing this practice. But the point is that there do come moments when two courses of action or two candidates for a job seem equally good, and a choice has to be made. And that choice often amounts to throwing dice, however we may rationalize the process.

They did it. Mathias was appointed. So in this interim they didn't spend all their time in prayer. And in our interims, when we await a change in our lives, there is work to do and decisions to be made. We think of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as an answer to the disciples' prayers. Perhaps it also was in answer to their courage and decision to go forward by selecting another apostle.

Prayer and a throw of dice. The story brings before us the two strands in the mystery of our decisions as Christian people.

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The first is the conviction that God knows which is the best course for us; and how—often, looking back, we now see how God was silently guiding us in His path. The second strand is the impossibility of receiving infallible directions, at the moment when we make our decision. We are always ^{of free will} God's children and not puppets. Therefore we can make wrong choices. But the two strands of our experience come together in the exercise of a great gift that the disciples knew during that strange interim. That gift is prayer. What I get from this curious story, then, is that, at all times, and especially in time of stress, of waiting, and of change, we must pray and we must make the decision, saying with Martin Luther, "I can do no other; God help me."

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