

Sermon – Easter 7 - Northleach

As you know at this time of year the lectionary encourages us to follow in the steps of the early church by following the book of Acts.

Today's episode which we heard in our first reading, tells of how the early followers of Jesus, keen to restore the apostle's numbers to 12, appointed Matthias to take the place of Judas. It is perhaps the first example of the exercise of democracy at the heart of the church. We don't know how close the final tally was, but even if it were overwhelmingly in Matthias' favour, there is a part of me that feels sorry for Joseph, and I wonder what future role he played in the ministry of the church.

Accepting the decision of others, especially when it is not in your favour calls for much grace and humility. And perhaps it is because we are unsure

of one another's strengths in this regard, that we so often try in church life to avoid making decisions other than by consent. I cannot recall overseeing a balloted election since I was ordained nine years ago which serves to illustrate that hesitancy rather clearly.

I find many of the stories from the early days of the church very moving, full of ordinary human interactions. Many of them are also deeply challenging too and I hope these stories strengthen our faith and remind us of the sacrificial cloud of witnesses that have sustained our journey of faith through the centuries. I also hope that they strengthen and sustain our efforts to share the good news of the risen Christ too.

Yesterday was the annual benefice walk in which a few of us seek to walk through all eight parishes of the benefice in one day, completing a 19-mile circuit in a very gentle ten hours or so.

It is a stunningly beautiful walk and the miles pass easily in the company of good friends and stimulating conversation.

Pilgrimage has a long and very honourable tradition in the Christian faith and our benefice walk, with prayers said at each church in turn, connects us with that tradition in a very meaningful way. This year I decided that at each church we would recall something of the life of each of the Saints to which our churches are dedicated to encourage us to reflect a little on the commitment and sacrifice of those that have gone before us.

One outcome of this is that in the shadow of these stories of witness, sacrifice and even martyrdom we can feel a little shallow in our own faith and witness. Our situation is so different to those of the early church or the Saints who followed them that we may struggle to see the relevance to us here and now in the beautiful Cotswolds of these early stories and characters from long ago.

Yet they continue to inspire us; part of the reason for this is that we are part of the same spiritual family that crosses the centuries and generations with such ease. But another reason is perhaps even stronger and more poignant; for it is their witness that has shaped so much of the culture of our faith in this land, and especially its rural culture. We recognise the debt we owe to the early Christians of this land, and thereby also the responsibility that comes with inheriting it.

As we walked our gentle hills and lanes yesterday I was very aware of this inheritance and the magnitude of the loss should it ever fade from our communities.

In order to protect our rural faith and culture, we need to understand it. So here are a few thoughts this morning that attempt to pinpoint what makes rural faith special and so worthy of our time and commitment.

First, the rural church speaks of a God in community. Our churches are often the physical focus of a community's common life and in communities without a village hall, the church is often the only communal gathering place now that so many of our village pubs and shops are gone. And despite the rapid rise of humanism and secularism there are few rural residents who would be pleased to see the church close, though probably a few more who sadly would like our

bells to fall silent. The rural church speaks of a God who is here, present amongst us, recognised as having a place, a part in our lives however differently we might interpret that.

Second, the rural church speaks of a God who is faithful. When the foundation of your faith has been physically present in the midst of your community for the past 800 years or whatever the precise figure may be, the uncertainties of the modern age – of which there appear to be an increasing number – should not concern us too much. Rural faith is about continuity – we're still here despite everything and if the past is our guide, nothing in the future will remove faith from our communities. We are both inheritors of the past and cornerstones for the future.

Thirdly, the rural church speaks of a God who is grounded in reality. Emmanuel – God is with us – is experienced in this benefice through the stories

of countless generations: stories of local and national pride and disaster; stories of love and stories of war.

Many non-churchgoers still want to use the church for those major liminal celebrations of life and of death; and we should embrace this enthusiasm as an opportunity to build relationships. And many still wish to engage with the church when we mark the seasons whether they be agricultural or religious.

Finally, the rural church speaks of a resilient God. The first apostles made their presence known, rooted themselves in the continuity of their faith, celebrated the liminal moments of their life and faith, but above all of this, knew what it meant to be resilient.

Resilience is essentially a spiritual discipline. It's about being rooted in something so deep, eternal,

mysterious and divine that you can find the small picture of your life in the big picture of God's eternal vision, and feel at home, not lost.

Spiritual resilience – the strength that comes from being deeply rooted in God – is a precious gift that the rural church enjoys through its location in the wide and generous expanse of God's creation. Helping others to discover this – whether residents, weekenders, holidaymakers, walkers or even, perhaps, pilgrims, is part of our task too.

God in community; the faithfulness of God; God rooted in the ordinariness of people's lives and a resilient God strengthening God's people for the day to day. These themes are central to the character and mission of the rural church; may we continue to nurture and celebrate them, **Amen.**