

## Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – September 13<sup>th</sup> 2009 Acts 1:15-26

Ian began his sermon by illustrating an incident where he had to identify a thief in an identity parade. He emphasised how the most powerful evidence offered to a court is an eye-witness account. And it is the power of the eye-witness account that guarantees our confidence in the authenticity of the gospel, and the authority of the Bible to address our lives. Feelings are elusive, and come and go; neither can we rely on signs and wonders because pagans can come up with their own; but the New Testament writing arose from those who actually saw Jesus and knew him, and so our confidence rests on the authority of those who saw the risen Jesus.

So when the disciples were looking for someone to make up their numbers after the death of Judas, they knew that the foundation of the Church rested on the testimony of those who were with them during Jesus' earthly ministry. Of course there are still difficulties in working this out as there are differences in emphasis with the words of Scripture.

This record is not everything that Jesus has said, but it is an accurate orderly account, so that when others come along like Dan Brown or a previous Bishop of Durham who tell us there is no such thing as sin, that Jesus wasn't really human, or that the resurrection is just a feeling, then we can recognise this for the nonsense that it is. The resurrection was a great surprise to the disciples – they were really not expecting it. The arrest, trial and death of Jesus were the end as far as they were concerned. As the current Bishop of Durham says, the only reason the apostles preached it was because it happened. They risked their lives for the sake of what they knew had happened. Matthias, who is chosen to replace Judas, the other disciples and the women were those who could testify that they saw him alive. Some days that is all you need to know. You can rest upon it, have this belt of truth around you when all feelings have gone. Our faith rests not on how I'm performing but on the apostolic tradition, on the testimony of those who saw him.

Of course there are those who would say why trust a man like Jesus who cannot even pick a winning team, when he chose Jesus who would betray him. So Peter, in this last sermon before Pentecost assures them that all of this was according to God's plan, to fulfil the Scriptures. Thus the betrayal by Judas which set in motion the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus was not some accident but part of the sovereign plan of God. This does not mean that Judas is innocent but that in the messiness of human decisions God has planned this.

Judas' treachery here leads to his defection from the band of apostles for the sake of buying a small farm perhaps to elevate his status. This choice of money over the Messiah is so often the reason for spiritual failure. The devil will nail you over money, stuff, possessions and it is here he has the greatest hold over our lives. Repeatedly we sell our soul for 30 pieces of silver, in the triumph of property over Jesus. We should be more afraid of the shopping malls than we are of the violence and the poor and the squalor. You cannot serve God and Money. And before you know it you've lost your passion.

Judas spills his guts (Gk. *splachna*) as he dies which is the very word to describe the very essence of following Jesus. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and show our *splachna*, being moved with gutsy love to show compassion for the needs of the world, to get our hands dirty. Judas is so self-absorbed, so preoccupied with his personal gain rather than with the way of Jesus, that he loses his compassion and his guts spill out.

So the defection of Judas teaches us that however attractive our property looks and however secure our fields are, they are the way of death. The place that we have will become the place of desolation.

So has our Christian discipleship affected our lives, affected our spending or giving? We have a life of joy, though not without its suffering and persecution. Like the Pakistani Christians we can say: 'I have Jesus and that is enough'.