

ST. MATTHIAS



The Acts of the Apostles 1:15 "In those days Peter stood up among the believers . . . and said, '. . . So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the times that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the days when he was taken up from us --- one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.' So, they proposed two (names), Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. . .' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles."

In seminary, I had one professor who was skeptical that Jesus himself actually called the Twelve, Apostles because the four lists of them we have in the New Testament, one in Matthew (10.2-5), one in Mark (3.14-19), one in Luke (6.12-16), and one

in Acts (1.13), do not all agree with each other; two of them include a Thaddeus among the Apostles, who is otherwise unmentioned in the New Testament, and the other two include in addition to Judas Iscariot, a Judas, son of James, who is possibly mentioned only once more in the Scriptures (John 14.22), though it is disputed as to whether it is really the same person. Meanwhile some well-known disciples of Jesus in the Gospel stories, like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Zaccheus, and Lazarus of Bethany, are not mentioned among the twelve, though their stories are well known. However, another professor of mine argued that the story of the selection of St. Matthias in today's reading from Acts seems to confirm that for the early Church, at least, there was a believed necessity to have twelve Apostles identified, perhaps reminiscent of the twelve tribes of Israel, and with Judas' death leaving a vacancy, there was an apparent need to fill it.

So, we are told the Eleven remaining apostles looked for a replacement among the disciples who had been with Jesus since his baptism right up to his Ascension into heaven. And in the end two names were proposed to fill that vacancy, namely, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. After prayer, the Eleven cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias, who became an Apostle.

Nothing more is said about Matthias in the New Testament, and he is not mentioned by the Church Fathers until the end of the second century. He is not one of those larger-than-life figures in the Scriptures or in Church history, those superhuman Christians whose legends and stories are often retold, like St. Peter and St. John. And though Matthias is often called an 'apostle,' he is not one of the original Twelve, like James and John, the sons of Zebedee, rather Matthias is a substitute, a second stringer, a replacement for one who has left the field. In fact, Matthias' election to take the place of Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus, the traitor, may not have been a highly coveted office. It was not like being the successor of Peter or Paul. Moreover, Matthias wasn't chosen because of his skills or talents or personality, the way we elect bishops today. Rather, Matthias was chosen simply as the result of the casting of dice. He acquired his place in the Church hierarchy by chance, an accident of circumstances if you will. And little is known of his life except for this story of his election in today's reading from Acts. Though it is explicitly stated that Matthias had been a follower of Jesus from the beginning, from the time of Jesus' baptism by John right up to Jesus' Ascension on Mount Olives, Matthias' life seems uneventful. There are no accounts of healings, or miracles, or mass conversions associated with his name. Though there is a work called the Gospel of Matthias

quoted some by St. Clement of Alexandria, mentioned by Origen, and attributed to heretics by Eusebius, nothing of the actual book survives. Thus, Matthias' life seems inconsequential, his words and actions ordinary and unmemorable. In one account he went off to mission work in Cappadocia, in modern day Turkey. In another, he was martyred in Ethiopia by cannibals, and in another, he was stoned to death by a crowd in Jerusalem.

The world, it seems to me, is filled with such unlikely heroes, with ordinary people who are asked to do extraordinary tasks, with common folk who have great responsibility thrust upon them and are then forgotten. I know that I felt that way myself a bit when I was a young priest in Boston newly ordained almost 45 years ago now, suddenly feeling that I didn't know what I had gotten myself into, that I didn't know what I was doing, or how to do it! At about that same time, there was a new show on television called "The Greatest American Hero." It was the story of a meek, mild mannered high school teacher named Ralph Hinkley, who found himself along with his coincidental sidekick, a gung-ho F.B.I. agent named Bill Maxwell and played by Robert Culp of I Spy fame. These two individuals were approached by a spaceship out in the desert one evening, and poor, unfortunate Ralph was given by the aliens a special suit to wear that would give him extraordinary powers which he and

his partner were to then use to fight for freedom, justice, and the American Way. Only Ralph was just a common man who was filled more with fear than with awe, and with scorn more than devotion. He didn't take up the call readily; he didn't want to be a hero. It was his sidekick, the F.B.I. agent that wanted to be the hero. Ralph just wanted to continue living as he always had; he just wanted to be like everyone else. He tried to shrug off the whole affair. But of course, his life would never be the same. Ralph hid the suit in his closet at first and even misplaced the instruction manual that went with it. But in the end, he couldn't ignore the challenge and responsibility that had been given him. However reluctantly, however unlikely, Ralph Hinkley became the Greatest American Hero.

But even so it wasn't easy, especially since Ralph had lost the instruction manual. I feel that way at times, as well, as 'our' instruction manual for Christians, The Bible, can be very confusing at times. Ralph wasn't even sure what powers he had when he wore the suit. He was very unsteady in his flying and hadn't quite learned yet how to set down properly, so that he was always crash landing into buildings or trees or people. Moreover, it was a very tacky red suit that he was given by the aliens and Ralph felt a bit embarrassed about being seen in it, as I did at first wearing a clerical collar in public. He felt awkward and out of place. Being a hero didn't come easily. It

all appeared really very silly. Ralph was in the end an improbable idol.

And yet that was the very thing that made me attracted to him. He was so ordinary, so unlikely a hero. It is easier to identify with him because of his humanness than with all those other superheroes who are not at all like us. Likewise, it is so much easier to identify with a St. Matthias than with a St. Peter or Paul, because Matthias' life appears so ordinary, so uneventful, so much like ours. As Christians struggling with our own baptismal vows, we know how Ralph feels. We too have felt embarrassed and awkward about our calling at times. We too have been reluctant to act upon our faith, we too have just wanted to continue living as we always have, to be just like everyone else. Yet like him we cannot easily dismiss our Christian responsibilities, however unprepared we are to fulfill it, however inconceivable it may be. We, as ordinary Christians, know what it means to be an unlikely hero.

And yet heroes are exactly what we are called to be. For we are the witnesses to the Resurrection in our day; we are the defenders of the faith for this generation; we are called to make the presence of Christ real and known in our world: such an extraordinary task for such ordinary people like you and me, who lead such seemingly uneventful and simple lives. But that's just it, don't you see, we are not "ordinary" people anymore. We are

disciples of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit at baptism, living a life of grace, and thus we have been given new power, new strength, a new life in God. We can be what God wants us to be if we only take up our cross and follow Him; if we would just put on our funny suit and fly, without being afraid or embarrassed, without first trying to figure it all out. It doesn't matter if we are a bit unsteady or unsure. It doesn't matter if we're reluctant or unenthused. Our lives are not ordinary unless we let them be so. 'Tis better to be an unlikely hero for Christ than no hero at all.

And we all know that we are called to do. We just recited and reaffirmed our own baptismal vows on Easter Sunday morning and will do it again next week for Pentecost. However unsure or unsteady we are, let us struggle then to love our enemies, serve our neighbors, say our prayers, feed the hungry, visit the sick, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. For that is what will make us heroes; that is what will transform our ordinary lives into extraordinary ones. And we mustn't let our timidity or uncertainty stand in the way. For in the end, we are not called to be something superhuman. For it is through our very humanness, our very ordinary lives and activities, that God will, with his grace, cause extraordinary things to happen, to transform our lives and the world we live in. AMEN.