

I wonder, how would we describe the church? Is it a club or society that we're part of. We join, pay our dues each week and come to the parts we want to and get involved at the level we are comfortable with. Or is the church something more – is it the visible expression of the kingdom of God, with the authority of God and instead of being something we join it's something we are called into (conscripted into) and so it is much less of a club and much more a kingdom in which we are subjects? (Or maybe we think the church is somewhere in-between and actually what I've presented are two extremes.)

In this morning's reading from the **Acts of the Apostles** we're given a picture of how we're to see the church.

After Jesus ascension into heaven the disciples returned to the upstairs room where they had been staying. This may well have been the same room they had their last supper with Jesus before his arrest. We're told all the disciples were there, they are listed by name, the only one missing is Judas, who killed himself out of remorse after betraying Jesus.

The women, including his mother Mary, who supported Jesus throughout his ministry were also there as well as a significant number of other followers – about 120 people in total. (To put this into context this was a congregation about the size of ours on a good day.)

We know this group were meeting in prayer, Luke tells us, ***they all joined together constantly in prayer.*** (Acts 1:14) It was during one of these times of prayer that Peter stood up and suggested that a new disciple or apostle should be appointed to replace Judas. There's no hint of this being a direct instruction from Jesus, rather this is something that's revealed or that comes to mind during the time of prayer.

Quoting from Psalm 69 and 109 to explain his thinking Peter went on to say that if Judas was to be replaced it should be by someone who was with Jesus from the beginning up to his death and resurrection. Remember, the instruction Jesus gave was that the apostles were to be witnesses of Jesus. Peter rightly reasons to be a witness to Jesus will mean the person would have to have seen and heard all that Jesus did.

Peter's suggestion must have seemed good to the congregation because two men were identified as being suitable (Matthias and Barsabbas) and then, following the Old Testament practice of casting lots, Matthias was chosen as the twelfth disciple.

It's worth noting at this point that we never hear of Matthias again, indeed there are very few of the disciples that we hear of after being named in this list. We know that Peter and John play a significant role in preaching, healing the sick and providing good governance for the church. James was put to death by Herod – this is all we know about any of the disciples.

And yet – we have a detailed record of the church calling Matthias and giving him the status of disciple and apostle, even though we know nothing about what happened to him or where he went or what he achieved.

This brings me back to our opening question. How would we describe the church? You see if the church is little more than another organisation that we join to enjoy and benefit from, then when

asked to be the next Matthias, someone very much in the background, someone who's significance is, humanly speaking, questionable, we might well say, what's the point. Why would I give myself to a role or an area of service in which we aren't sure if there will be much in the way of success, recognition or purpose even.

If the church is different, then it demands a different response.

Notice what's happening here. The disciples, and others, we're told were **constantly in prayer**. This decision to replace Judas isn't something that's come out of idol minds wondering what to do next – it is a direct response to what we must assume was earnest prayer.

This mirrors the way in which Jesus chose his original 12 disciples. **One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When the morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.** (Luke 6:12-13)

It seems in Luke's telling of this story and in the way the disciples and Matthais react that there is a clear understanding that the church in calling Matthais is acting under the guidance and in the authority of God by his Spirit (even though Pentecost had not yet come.)

How do we describe the church? Churches across the board of all denominations are struggling to find people to serve. I am very intentionally not using the word volunteer, because I don't actually believe that service in the church is the same as volunteering and for this reason.

If the church calls us into service through the guidance of the spirit and by the authority of God then we are not called to volunteer (A volunteer is someone who gives themselves to something without expectation, it is voluntary, our choice.) If the church has the authority of God and acts under the guidance of the Spirit, then we are not being asked to volunteer but commanded to serve (more akin to conscription).

If the church is simply another club or society then we are volunteers, if it is something else, part of the Kingdom of God in which we are subjects, then it is service to that kingdom that we are commanded to and not volunteers.

If this is true, then there is another incredibly important application for our elders and leadership within the church. This authority is not something we can abuse. We cannot simply approach people asking them to serve and say you must do this because we are the church, and we command you under the authority of God.

As leaders we must take the responsibility of calling people into service seriously. We are to follow the example set by Jesus himself and adopted by the disciples in calling Matthais. Every appointment ought to be the result of constant and considerable prayer. It ought not to be rushed but confirmed by the spirit.

This isn't just true for appointments made by Kirk Session. You the congregation elect elders and committee. Those votes ought to be cast in the same way, as a result of much prayer and seeking the will of God. Actually, there will be opportunity for you do exercise this authority sooner rather than later.

Kirk Session asked me to approach Presbytery for permission to co-opt Ronnie Crooks as an elder onto our kirk session. Ronnie, an elder in good standing in his previous congregation of Wellington joined us a number of years ago. You will of course in due course have opportunity

to see and hear more from Ronnie in the coming weeks, but the result of this will be that you will be required to vote yes or no to Ronnie being co-opted onto session.

If we learn anything from this passage it is if Ronnie, or any who are called to serve in this church are to do so from a position of authority then our decision to put them in that position must, must be rooted in prayer.

What is the church? It is the visible expression of the Kingdom of God into which we are commanded to serve through the guidance of the spirit and by the authority of God. How will we respond to that command, how will we discern the will of God. Surely the answer is we respond in obedience because the call has been discerned by much prayer.