

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 16th May 2021.*

*Acts 1:15–17, 21–end, Psalm 1, John 17:6–19*

***Prayer for St Brandon's***

*Alison Hobbs*

We've heard today's readings in the reverse order to the events they tell.

Today's reading from John's gospel is part of a long section in which we hear Jesus giving his final instructions, cautions, prayers and farewells to the disciples as they share that last supper before his crucifixion. He has washed their feet, Judas has departed, he has talked about going ahead and sending them the Spirit to be their helper, and how they must remain a part of him. Now, his dialogue changes to talking – praying - to his Father, first for himself, then his disciples, then future believers. Only then does he leave and head for the place of his betrayal, and all those events of Easter.

The reading from Acts follows six or so weeks later when the disciples, having received their great commission to make believers in all nations and seen the risen Jesus for the last time as he ascends to his Father, are now waiting prayerfully in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit. It's been a whirlwind of events and a roller coaster of emotions since that last supper. They have much to ponder and digest as they wait quietly and expectantly. They need to rest and re-gather their hopes: things are not over, they are only just beginning for a whole new chapter in which they now are going to take centre stage, and with only the as yet unknown capacity of the Holy Spirit to guide them: alone yet so not alone in doing that work entrusted to them.

Peter, at this point, decides they should put themselves in order; exercising his new authority: Jesus particularly gave him the task of being head – the keyholder - of his new church, he organises an election to replace Judas and bring them back to twelve, who are to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. With neither Jesus nor his Spirit available to them, they use the time honoured way of calling on God to choose by casting lots, as we would toss a coin.

Well, what have these readings to say to us here today, on St Brandon's Day? For one thing, its sobering, to me to think that St Brandon would have read them himself, 1500 years ago as he navigated his way through uncharted waters (as would the forty-four or so Rectors who have ministered here since the church's founding, over 900 years ago). And still we read them as accounts alive with relevance for us, now.

Our watching and waiting may be small fry compared to the disciples, but nonetheless we are in watching and waiting times; not only in the church year, waiting for Pentacost but watching this pandemic racing around the world, watching on news, waiting on dates that may permit us more freedoms, waiting for a multitude of personal tragedies to stop. So much has been shaken up this last fifteen months, so much remains uncertain that its hard to guess when the effects of that shaking will cease: perhaps another year or two for some, a lifetime for many.

Let us not, however, be discouraged. Jesus prayed for his disciples, and for us, that we may live and work in the safety and power of God's love. It is a complicated sounding prayer because of John's writing style which seems to get more convoluted as the tension rises.

Let's revisit it.

The way the passage is selected today, it starts with three verses in which Jesus spells out to his Father the completion of the task he undertook:

Firstly - He has made God's name known to these disciples. Jesus has entrusted these disciples with knowledge that was never previously given to humans: the knowledge of God's character and power – his very name. That name that was too terrible for mankind to hear previously. That name that was represented by the letters YHWH. That meant, when Moses asked God in the burning bush to tell him his name, who sent him, replied “say to the Israelites “I AM has sent me to you””. This knowledge of who Jesus is will be complete when they have witnessed the coming events.

Secondly, knowing that divine name of Jesus means they know he is sent by God and, therefore, his words - all he speaks - comes from God. Jesus' work in teaching his disciples is thereby achieved, his mission will soon be completed and it will be for the disciples to carry his mission on.

Jesus now launches into his prayer, asking – praying – on the disciples behalf, acknowledging they belong to him, Jesus, and therefore to God; and that in them, he has been glorified (this completion of his mission, again). He prays for God to keep them safe as he leaves them. He acknowledges that the disciples have accepted and kept the word that Jesus brought them from God, this word has cleansed them, now it sets them aside for a mission of conveying it to others.

Jesus asks God to sanctify the disciples in the truth; this is what the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth will do when it comes, it will make Jesus' words intelligible.

To sanctify is to make holy, another translation uses the word ‘consecrate’, so Jesus’ last statement can read as *‘And it is for them that I consecrate myself, in order that they too may be consecrated in truth’* pointing, perhaps, to his imminent sacrifice, as he had said previously: *“I lay down my life for my friends.”*

As I wonder about what these texts say to us on St Brandon’s Day, I have to smile: I’m sure our Reader and Churchwardens would have been making sure we had a twelfth disciple! And I thank God for the diligence and attentiveness of the committees and church structures that have kept us safe thus far; for the planning, policies and provision God has made for us through them.

I’d like to make that prayer that Jesus prayed for his disciples a prayer today for the people of St Brandon’s, on this our patron saint’s day. Praying God would keep us safe from the evil one, making his word of truth known to us, to cleanse us and strengthen us for making disciples of all nations. But most of all, as we anticipate restrictions on spacing and singing getting lifted, maybe, maybe soon, and we move on again, I pray *“Holy Father, protect us in your name that you have given Jesus, so that we may be one, as you are one.”* I pray for our unity that all who are currently in the hold of St Brandon may stay connected, embrace the old and the new, people and traditions, across the age-groups, that we may be one, as you are one.

*Amen*