

Sunday after Ascension Day

There is an old legend about Christ's return to Heaven on Ascension Day. The Angel Gabriel was there to meet him.

"Welcome back, my Lord," smiled Gabriel, bowing low, "Have you completed what you set out to do?"

"I think so," replied Jesus.

"You successfully organised a church to carry on your work and teaching?" the Archangel asked.

"Well," replied Jesus, I left behind eleven men to really set things moving."

"Eleven men!" gasped the Archangel. "Is that all?"

"That is all," Jesus replied quietly.

"Those eleven men you chose," continued Gabriel, "Were they men of great importance and scholarship?"

"No!" said Jesus with a smile, "As a matter of fact they were very ordinary, work-a-day men."

"But what if it should fail?" asked the Archangel. "The whole enterprise will have been in vain! All that suffering on the cross will be wasted!"

Jesus replied with complete confidence, "I have made no other plans."

Our Gospel reading today is the prayer of Jesus to God at the Last Supper, commending the apostles to God's care because they had been given to Jesus to continue and complete his mission. Jesus had chosen these men, ordinary, everyday men, because the leaders of the Jewish people of the time and religious groups like the Pharisees and the Sadducees had placed the Law above God's love and compassion. "Keep all the Law and you will go to heaven, break any of the Law and you will be punished." Yet the Law had so many rules and regulations it was almost impossible to keep them all and carry on with an everyday life. It was also an explanation for peoples' misfortunes. "You appear to be a good person, but you must have done something awful to be struck down by this dreadful sickness!"

This prayer of Jesus, in some ways, seems almost more suitable for just before he leaves his disciples on Ascension Day than for just before he goes out to face arrest and crucifixion. Jesus gives praise and thanks to God at the beginning of the prayer and talks about the apostles and how they have come to know the only true God and the way to eternal life, praying for them as he leaves them and commending them to God's care. It is verse 11 and those which follow (it is well worth reading the whole prayer) which seems like a final farewell to those left behind to carry out the mission of founding the church. "Now I am departing from the world; I am leaving them behind and coming to you.... During my time here, I have kept them safe. I guarded them so that not one was lost, except the one heading for destruction, as the Scriptures foretold."

Whenever and where ever Jesus prayed this prayer, it is commending these eleven men as those who were to found the church of Christ in the world and with the help of others who believed in Christ, or came to belief in Christ through their teaching, began the spread of Christ's message and the love of God out to all who would accept it