

THE NECESSITY FOR THE REPLACEMENT OF JUDAS ISCARIOT (ACTS 1: 15: 26)

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Abstract

Vacancies and vacuums are bound to arise in the apostolic band as a result of their vulnerability as well as mortality. Hence, the inevitability for replacement; fascinatingly, it is God who always provides replacements in and through human agency and instrumentality that is not necessarily based on ancestral connection, as it was in the Old Testament form of priesthood, but basically on divine choice and vocation as it yet makes discreet reference to the Old Testament rite of election.

Key Words: Replacement, Apostolic and Succession

Introduction

It is a natural and an anticipated phenomenon that the number of the twelve apostles should deplete and depreciate with the passage of time owing to their human vulnerability and mortality, which would necessitate replacements for the continuation of the adherence to the Great Commission. However, there is no biblical narrative of the replacement of the apostles either consequent upon old age or death, except Judas Iscariot who chose his own part. In line with this, F. Bruce stresses that “It was Judas defection and not the mere fact of his death that created the vacancy; no step was taken to appoint a successor to James, son of Zebedee when he died by the executioner's sword some years later.”¹ The need to, therefore, ascertain the reason for Luke's inclusion of this account in the Acts of the Apostles cannot be underestimated.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (NICNT, Eerdmans: Grand Rapid, Michigan, 1989), p. 47.

The Person and Personality of Judas Iscariot

A widely quoted Chinese proverb has it that “The worst form of ingratitude is to betray one's teacher, while it is still worse to betray one's master.” Judas' case is not any different from this. Nonetheless, a good grasp of his person and his personality will be fundamental to understanding his behavioural spectacles. It would be recalled that aside choosing Judas and enrolling him into the apostolic band, Jesus entrusted him with the office of trust that he eventually betrayed. This initial betrayal that brought him to the limelight is a tip of the iceberg. However, both are prompted by appalling and squalid greed. In furtherance of this, the author of the Fourth Gospel, John the evangelist, suggests that “it was Judas' avarice and dishonesty which were the deciding factors, but money cannot have been his primary motive, given the amount”² for it was it was comparatively and relatively modest. For others, the motivation for his sordid action still remains unexplainable and buttresses God's respect for the responsible exercise of human freedom. Thus, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “Judas betrayal continues to be a mystery. Jesus treated him as a friend (cf. Matthew 26: 50), but in his invitations to follow him on the path of the beatitudes he did not force his will or prevent him from falling into Satan's temptations, respecting human freedom.”³ Besides, Judas' action which was prompted by pecuniary consideration speaks volumes not only about the premium he placed on the person and personality of Jesus, but himself as well. Joseph Ratzinger underscores the inclusive implication of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. He says: “For him, life was ultimately reduced to buying and selling and while he considered himself clever and wanted to become rich, he failed to realize that, by putting himself up for sale, he himself became a commodity, that he sold and debased himself.”⁴ By putting his inordinate ambition in the foreground, he lowered and downsized the quality of human life.

The Significance of the Number “Twelve”

The number 'twelve' is symbolic. Nevertheless, it was “Only after the betrayal of Judas did the significance of the number twelve itself become apparent. The apostles (under the leadership of Peter) considered it their first duty to restore their number to twelve (Acts 1: 15- 26).”⁵

All Jews knew that there were twelve tribes of Israel. These twelve tribes corresponded to the twelve sons of the patriarch, Jacob. Ten of the tribes had been lost

² www.jesus-story.net/betrayal.htm

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Wednesday's General Audience, 18th October, 2006.

⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth: Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, ed. Irene Grassl, trans. Mary F. McCarthy and Lothar Krauth (Ignatius Press : San Francisco, 1992), p. 359; Kanu, Ikechukwu A., *The Church and National Development: Towards a Philosophy of Collaboration. African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal*. Vol.6. No.2. April 2012. pp. 113-122; Kanu, Ikechukwu A., *Theological Models of Youth in Christus Vivit*. *Nnadiabube Journal of Religion, Culture and Society*. Vol. 1. No. 1. 2018. pp. 1-11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

seven centuries earlier to Assyrian invasion and the hope of subsequent restorations heightened by the prophets was the longing of many Jews. Hence, the choice of the twelve signalled the restoration they had waited for. Besides, it “may mark them the apostles out as leaders of the new Israel.”⁶ Moses received the law at Sinai; the twelve received grace from Jesus. “The law was given that grace might be sought; and grace was given that the law might be fulfilled.”⁷ In addition, the number “twelve” has an eschatological resonance. In this vein, Berard L. Marthaler holds that “The twelve who were witnesses at the beginning of the new Israel will also be witnesses at the end, judging the faithfulness of the people of God.”⁸ As gleaned above, Luke's emphasis is on the number “Twelve.” Hence, he tells us nothing about the historical background of Mathias, who simply disappeared from the narrative as soon as appeared; beyond the brief mention, there is nothing conclusive known about him before and after his election to the apostolic college.

The Necessity for His Replacement

Following the unfaithful departure of Judas, the number of the apostles declined and depleted to eleven thereby creating a vacancy that needed to be filled in. Gleaned from the aforesaid, the number “Twelve” is irrefutably significant in the biblical parlance as it signifies “both the seeds of the new Israel and the beginning of the sacred hierarchy.”⁹ It should also be understood that each and every thing about Judas and the eventual reconstitution of the apostolic band was not by coincidence since it was a strong pointer to the necessity for protraction even as it highlights the prominence of divine role in the election of his successor. For F. Bruce, “Both the defection of Judas and the necessity of replacing him are viewed here as subjects of the Old Testament prophecy.”¹⁰ It is against this background that Simon Peter gives his speech that clearly spells out the criteria for the election as “succession is never the taking over of some official powers that are then at the disposal of the office bearer; rather, it is being taken into the service of the word, the office of testifying to something with which one has been entrusted and which stands above its bearer....”¹¹

Yet, it is succeeded and eclipsed by prayers as the election was refined by grace because the office “designates an envoy authorized by God and appointed for a task.”¹² According Joseph A. Fitzmyer, the implication of the prayers is “that God's

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p. 44.

⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 6 August, 1993, no. 23.

⁸ B. L. Marthaler, *The Creed* (Twenty-Third Publications: Mystic Connecticut, 1987), p. 318.

⁹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 21.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p. 44.

¹¹ J. Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture- Tradition- Office* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), p. 23.

¹² Benedict XVI & R. Sarah, *From the Depths of Our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy and the Crisis of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), p. 27.

providence will provide a replacement for him among the Twelve and this borne out in the selection of Mathias by lot.”¹³ It is to be recalled that the tradition of casting lot was an Old Testament practice with a rich symbolism; it demonstrates man's total submission to God's will, a suitable ceremony for determining God's choice and providence in the face of human limitedness. In adopting this notable Old Testament ritual, it inserts the novelty of the sacramentality of the ceremonial that emerges. Thus, Joseph Ratzinger holds that “we can say with good reason that this procedure shows the sacramentality of the office, for, in the last analysis, no man can place another man in office; that must come from a higher power than man possesses.”¹⁴ Similarly, it, also, denotes “the Holy Spirit as guarantor of this continuity.”¹⁵ This underlines an essential dimension and the significance of the Holy Spirit in the election and consecration of Bishops as well as the ordination of priests given that “it expresses the fact the Church does not confer the fullness of power in her own right, as secular institutions do, but is, rather, the creation of the Holy Spirit, by whose gift she continually lives.”¹⁶

The Undercurrents

Since the Church exists for the perpetuation of Christ's work of redemption, there is a dire need for the sacramental continuity of leadership, which marks the beginning of the apostolic succession in the early Church, which is not the same as apostolicity of doctrine and apostolicity of origin. Nonetheless, *apostolicitasuccessionis* (apostolicity of succession) safeguards the sacred preservation and faithful transmission of both *apostolicitasoriginis* (apostolicity of origin) and *apostolicitasdoctrinae* (apostolicity of doctrine). Thus Ludwig Ott contends that “The apostolicity of the succession guarantees the unfalsified transmission of doctrine and makes manifest the organic connection between the Church of the present day and the Church of the Apostles.”¹⁷ It ensures that the past is not walled off from the present because it serves as a bond between the apostolic era and the contemporary Church. Luke, the evangelist, underscores this necessity for the apostolic succession when he “sets up the Twelve as instrument of continuity.”¹⁸ This finds resonance in Joseph Ratzinger's perspective although with a telling addition: “Apostolic succession entails, first of all, the familiar idea that the bishops guarantee

¹³ J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Vol. 31 (Yale University Press: New Haven & London, 1998), p. 220.

¹⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth*, p. 197.

¹⁵ J. Ratzinger, *God and the World*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), p. 350.

¹⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary F. McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 241.

¹⁷ L. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Charlotte, North Carolina: TAN Books, 1974), p. 308.

¹⁸ D. Marguerat, “The Resurrection and Its Witnesses in the Book of Acts” in S. Waltoret [et al.] (eds.), *Reading Acts Today: Essays in Honour of Loveday C. A. Alexander* (Bloomsbury T & T Clark: London [et al], 2011), p. 45.

the continuity and unity-in a continuity that we call sacramental.”¹⁹ Luke's narrative of the election of Mathias, an Apostle not immediately and directly chosen by Christ, as a replacement for Judas in *Acts 1: 16- 20, 25- 26* has, as a matter of fact, become one of the biblical proofs for the Church's doctrine of apostolic succession.

Furthermore, the account of his election highlights the important role of the apostles as the “witnesses” of the resurrection. In *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries*, Bernard P. Prusak says in this regard that “They are to be witnesses. In Acts (10: 39, 42), they are witnesses to all that Jesus did during his ministry, commissioned by the risen Jesus 'to preach to the people and testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.'”²⁰

As a matter of fact, our Christian faith is deeply rooted in the resurrection of the Lord and our preaching and witnessing must always spring from this mystery of faith. And so, William Willimon reminds us: “The Apostolic circle is drawn only from eyewitnesses who can give a reliable account of the Jesus-event.”²¹

In addition, the attendant lesson inherent in the significant replacement of Judas by Mathias illustrates that betrayal of some is eclipsed by the faithfulness of others as could be seen in the electoral guideline stipulated by the apostolic electoral umpire, Peter. The view of Pope Benedict XVI does not slant from this for he firmly believes that “To the greatness of his fidelity was later added the divine call to take the place of Judas, almost compensating for his betrayal.”²²

Hence, the dire need for evil perpetrated in the Church by a negligible few to be corrected by our authentic and uninterrupted steadfast witness to Christ. Judas alone betrayed Jesus, but two persons were put forward as possible candidates for his replacement. Joseph Ratzinger would, then, say: “If there do not exist in the Church strengths that have something to offer us today, then, her presentation of herself will be of little value to us. These strengths undoubtedly do exist in the Church...”²³

Conclusion

Judas's treacherous exit signals the indispensability of his replacement, which was the first and foremost, the concern of the eleven in the exercise of their post-

¹⁹ J. Ratzinger, *The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements*, Proceedings of the World of the Ecclesiastical Movements, 27-29 May, 1998, no. II.

²⁰ B. P. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (Pauline Press: New York/ Mahwah, N. J., 2004), p. 94.

²¹ W. Willimon, *Acts Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1988), p. 24.

²² Pope Benedict XVI, Wednesday's General Audience, 18th October, 2006.

²³ J. Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth*, p. 261.

resurrection apostolic ministry. It buttresses the significance of the number “Twelve” and serves a substratum for the age long doctrine of apostolic succession as well as a call and challenge to an authentic Christian witnessing that would overshadow its antithesis. Furthermore, it discovers not only the origin and validity of apostolic succession, but also seeks to understand its meaning so as to appreciate its value.