

Decisions, decisions

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; John 17:6-19

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

The ascension story ends with two ‘men’ dressed in white asking the disciples ‘why are you staring at the sky gobsmacked laddies, – get on with it!’ my translation, of course.

And so they did. The first order of business was to replace Judas. How would they go about that? Well, first they set down some criteria:

- It had to be someone there from the beginning, right from when Jesus was Baptised, and
- The person had to have been a witness to events from the crucifixion to the resurrection – the whole story so far...

They looked around and saw people who fitted. Two men, now don’t start me on why a woman wasn’t considered – I would have thought either Mary would be in the running but that is another sermon.

And what did they do? Did they vote? Greeks knew how to vote. No, they prayed and then drew lots. They left it to chance ...or, the Holy Spirit, depending on how you look at it.

We talked last week about the good order of the church and how important that is. And here we are in the Jewish festival of the law: a celebration of bringing down the order that would hold the chosen people together as one.

I am told, on good authority, that Leviticus is not boring. Honestly! Have you read it? Apparently, and I have this on 2nd authority, between the food laws and what cloths are acceptable, there is a whole body of law that relates to social order, welfare and good citizenship. How to *be* a people caring for each other and the land. It organised everything from who and how to care for widows and orphans, how the faith would be run to when to let fields rest between crops and how much to leave for gatherers (both human and animal). Leviticus is a complete manual for social order.

In the way that the Spirit moves, I have to attend to my compulsory Ethical Ministry training next week. You know we have to do refreshers twice a year and the topic are chosen way ahead of time. The topic this week's topic is (drum roll, please) *Relationships with the councils of the church*). I can see you are excited.

With each session, there is homework. And mine just happen to require us to read the Basis of Union again. Before you nod off here, I want you to think about how we are organised. UCA is unique. Let me read you a short bit from section 15 of the Basis of Union:

The Uniting Church recognises that responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them. The Uniting Church therefore so organises its life that locally, regionally and nationally government will be entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing the gifts and graces with which God has endowed them for the building up of the Church.

The Uniting Church acknowledges **that Christ alone is supreme in his Church**, and that **he may speak** to it through any of its councils. It is the task of every **council to wait upon God's Word**, and **to obey God's will** in the matters allocated to its oversight. Each council will recognise the limits of its own authority and give heed to other councils of the Church, so that the whole body of believers may be **united by mutual submission**¹ in the service of the Gospel...

We are not a church of individuals who decide...we are a body, a collective that divines. Now *that* is amazing. Written into our being is the place for the Spirit to speak. I learned a new Greek word this week, 'Homothumodon'. It is actually what we are looking for when we talk about consensus. It means 'of one mind'. How we discern in the Uniting Church is to remember to listen and wait until the Spirit moves.

I find it amusing that many churches with hierarchical structures and bishops to tell them what to do have written the Spirit out of their governance.

But back to Acts. The lads drew straws and their mission began. We are at the beginning of the church as the body of Christ. We are witnessing the disciples

¹ That's all my bold. The Basis of Union is written quietly.

pulling it together and beginning to allocate who does what – and like the Council of our Church, they are each called and allocated tasks according to their gifts and graces.

This is a beginning story.

There must have been a time when this church in Merimbula or Wyndham was just a couple of people with no building and no idea where to begin. Every congregation has a beginning story. I think we should reclaim it, retell it – make a pageant out of it. So that our children and their children’s children know how this came to be. When the Passover story is told each year at millions of Seder tables, I have what they call Holy Envy². That’s when you look into another religion and you think, I wish we had that!’ The seriousness of the ritualised telling and retelling of the journey stories binds generations.

We love these buildings, these Hymns and traditions but it is the people who made this church. People with an ear to the heart and a shoulder to the work. Good order, good governance means 1000 decisions needed to be made and continue to be made. The hard part is not to let a ram rule the herd. Not let factions and fractions create divisions but to remain true to our founding documents that gave us liberty *and* order. Our decisions can only be made with the voices of many and with room for the Spirit.

Finally, we have the beautiful reading from John 17. Jesus prays to the father the love of all created. He has left a body of Christ that needs to be nurtured and protected. In this passage, Jesus pours his love into a plea: Protect them in your name that you have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.

May we always leave room for the Spirit.

J Shannon

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy* (2019)