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

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Having just had our Annual Parochial Church Meeting, the APCM, a couple of weeks ago, I was amused to read the story in Acts, that we heard a moment ago, about the very first meeting of a congregation in Church history! They have a quota of available places on the leadership team – twelve – but only eleven members, because one of their number, Judas, effectively resigned when he betrayed their leader, Jesus. So they needed one more to bring them back up to full strength.

Now, not having South Weald’s well-tried method of twisting people’s arms, they took two nominations and cast lots. Joseph/Barsabbas/Justus or Matthias. Practically, they probably wrote the two names on stones, put them in a jar and kept shaking them until one fell out; that one being the one God had chosen to fulfil the role.

And when those apostles in the story from Acts finally elect a successor to Judas, they all know he’s the best of a bad bunch – apart from Justus and Matthias, it seemed that the rest of the viable candidates may have been women. Mary Magdalene was probably the best choice – she had been at the tomb and had remained faithful when all the men had fled – but for obvious reasons she wasn’t even nominated.

Flipping a coin or picking a name out of a hat isn’t the way we normally select our spiritual leaders, apart from in a small number of traditional Mennonite communities, but for the early church community in the Acts of the Apostles, casting lots was by no means a matter of luck or serendipity. It was an act positively awash with prayer. Before they chose the next apostle, they will have prayed for God’s presence in that process. When God is included in the equation, luck becomes synchronicity- meaningful coincidence - if you like: it reveals the movement of God in the midst of otherwise random events.

It was the English theologian, Leslie Weatherhead, who died in the late 1970s, who once said: when I pray, coincidences happen; when I don’t, they don’t. Neither Weatherhead nor I believe that prayer is magic or that it changes normal cause and effect relationships, but we do believe that prayer connects us with the deeper wisdom, power, and insight of God. Prayer opens a connection with the mind of God, and it is that connection that enables us to see more and do more. We notice things we may previously have missed. And so our prayers may very well guide our steps into alignment with God’s vision for us and our communities.

I wonder what it might have felt like to have Jesus pray with and for a person. How it would feel to have Jesus standing here praying for me. What would it be like for Jesus to know your challenges and hopes and to be interceding on your behalf? This is precisely what Jesus’ first disciples experienced, and I believe that still works in our lives today.

In today’s gospel reading Jesus is praying directly to his Father. He has just said, a few verses earlier: Father, the hour has come, and so he continues, praying for his followers, both then and now. He is praying for their unity and for their protection. And that prayer of protection reaches out across time to envelop us and give us the courage to do what we need to do too.

But it is clear that in this praying, even Jesus was somewhat uncertain: if there’s one thing that passage from John’s gospel tells us, it’s that Jesus is not entirely confident about the people he is leaving behind. He knows they are vulnerable – there is no manual for them to refer to, he will no longer be there to protect them, to stop them from making mistakes, to guide them as they make decisions for the whole Early Church.

And then again, we might argue that those people in that Acts story are not a church at all. Not in any sense that we would recognise. They are more a memorial group for Jesus. It wasn’t until next week’s story, the story of Pentecost, that they became anything that could properly be called a church. At Pentecost, they got such a boost of Holy Spirit that they couldn’t help becoming a church – a body of people united in the activity of getting the message of Jesus out there into the world. Church – united – well, in theory at least. It was much more obvious back then than it is now, sadly…

So it can be our assumption that Jesus continues to pray for us.

The Church started praying the global wave of prayer entitled Thy Kingdom Come on Thursday and continues until Pentecost, next Sunday. Check out the resources on the Church of England website, by all means, but if you were simply to pray the Lord’s Prayer daily for the next week, that would be a major contribution to the wave.

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen**