

ASCENSION SUNDAY

This Tuesday is St Matthias' Day! In our first reading today, we hear about the apostles' own by-election in which they voted for their favourite candidate to replace Judas.

And this Tuesday is our Annual Election of Churchwardens, immediately followed by our Annual Parochial Church Meeting. Every party, organization, institution needs its own governance in a democracy and we probably have the ancient Greeks to thank for that!

Sadly, attendance is often poor at our annual meetings, clergy lose sleep about whether there will be enough new volunteers to come forward or again, in some situations the reverse sometimes happens. There is a competition for a particular post or responsibility that has become vacant – and yes, the only way to come to a decision is by voting. Churches are never exempt from political manoeuvring and looking back over the years, some of it has been painful in my experience or just plain sad.

It also happens beyond parish boundaries because we seem to love different 'hierarchies' of responsibility. There's Deanery Synod, there's Diocesan Synod, and for the most ambitious amongst us, there is the apparent 'draw' of General Synod. It helps if you are retired! My observation has been that some people enjoy all this a great deal and many others, not at all.

But if we return to our text from Acts, the choices needed for roles of support and leadership also require the activity of

prayer: 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen...'

This in-between time from Ascension to Pentecost is indeed a wonderfully ripe time for communal and individual prayer across the globe. In our Prayer Journal 'Thy Kingdom Come', I very much enjoyed listening to Archbishop Angaelos yesterday on 'praying with icons'.

Each day this week there is something really heartening about praying in solidarity: to the God who loves, who speaks, who creates, who gives, who walks with us, who listens, who saves, who challenges and encourages, who empowers. This 'Novena' of prayer is so rich in reaching the most cynical believer or voter, or yes, new potential apostles and leaders in Christ, Jesus.

We need to pray about Tuesday night as much as we need to pray about the future of our nation and the huge and difficult decisions which still need to be shared and made. We need to be supportive of one another and if someone is giving up a particular task or gift or role, how do we take up their mantle so that, together, we continue to flourish and grow?

Imagine how Matthias must have felt once the vote was in: fearful or, intrepid, adventurous? Ignatian prayer and spirituality allows us to just imagine ourselves in any given situation like that, just to 'enter into' the different feelings we can experience or, reflect upon. Again my observation is: that we too quickly say 'No' instead of 'Yes' to the surprising opportunities God gives us to serve His people faithfully and well and, so often, in new ways too.

This in-between time of our liturgical year, we pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit such that it can and will surprise us, because God may be speaking to us and come to us afresh - like a whisper or, like a hurricane, like a dove silent in flight or like flames of inspiration we cannot resist. Which image speaks to you about how you can join in and continue the mission and outreach of St Mary's, Woodbridge?

Please open your hearts up in prayer and contemplation about the next steps and your vision and involvement for the future. And most of all, stay positive and hopeful as we all pray, post-Communion: "confirm us in this mission, and help us to live the good news we proclaim."

Dear sisters and brothers, I haven't forgotten that this Sunday is also 'Bell Sunday'! So I thought I would end with Malcolm Guite's poem entitled 'New Year's Day: Church Bells':

" Not the bleak speak of mobile messages, the soft chimes of synthesized reminders, not texts, not pagers, data packages, not satnav or locators ever find us as surely, soundly, deeply as these bells that sound and find and call us all at once. 'Ears of my ears' can hear, my body feels this call to prayer that is itself a dance. So ring them out in joy and jubilation, sound them out in sorrow tolling the lost, O let them wake The Church and rouse the nation, a sleeping lion stirred to life at last, Begin again they sing, again begin, A ring and rhythm answered from within."

Amen.