

Sermons for Saints' Days and Holidays. No. 1, St. Matthias

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of apostolic succession and the Episcopal office in the Church, and warns against abusing or neglecting the privilege of apostolic ministry.

Scripture: Acts 1:15

Topics: "Apostolic Ministry", "Sacramental Theology"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches on the importance of recognizing that it is Jesus who chooses and ordains individuals for ministry, emphasizing the need to bring forth lasting fruit. He highlights the early Church's reliance on Apostolic succession and the significance of the ordination of Matthias. Newman stresses the essential role of bishops in connecting Christians to Christ and the Apostles, as seen in the teachings of the early Church fathers like St. Ignatius. He warns against the dangers of neglecting the Apostolic Ministry and the sacraments, pointing out the severe consequences of taking these gifts for granted.

Transcript

"Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, and that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain."—St. John xv. 16.

THE service of this day invites us to consider the nature and commission of that ministry, by which Christians all over the world are made partakers of heavenly and spiritual blessings.

On this point, as on most others, it is obvious that the New Testament does nowhere furnish a regular and orderly course of instruction, such as on many great subjects we find in our Creeds, Articles, and Catechism. But the mind and will of our Divine Master may be gathered plainly enough, at least by those who are willing to show a reasonable respect to the witness of the early Church.

St. Luke, in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, informs us, that our LORD was not taken up, until "after that He, through the Holy Ghost, had given commandments unto the Apostles whom He had chosen;—being seen of them" at various times during as much as "forty days," and "speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of GOD." Then, doubtless, He gave them instruction in what method and order to proceed, what kind of ministry to settle in His Church. Who would not wish to know what was the tenor of those conversations? But the Holy Ghost, in His unsearchable wisdom, has not seen fit directly to

put them on record: an omission which appears very significant, when compared with the minute register which the Gospels supply of many former discourses. So it is, that on the occasion, which would seem to promise most information concerning the nature of CHRIST'S kingdom, instead of finding any report of what our blessed SAVIOUR said, we find a report of what His Apostles did. Their Acts and Letters take place of the desired memorial of His parting instructions. Is not this a hint to us all, on authority which cannot safely be despised, that we must look to the actual conduct and system of the early Church for a true notion of the things pertaining to "the kingdom of GOD," of which our LORD then spake to His Apostles. However early, on minute points, partial errors may have crept in, is it not evident to common sense, that the system which we trace back in the Church to the very generation next following the Apostles, must be in all great points the very system enjoined by our LORD, and partially disclosed in the subsequent history of His servants?

It follows, that in order to make out our SAVIOUR'S will on any point relating to the discipline and proceedings of His Church, the first portion of Scripture to which our attention is directed is the Acts of the holy Apostles.

Now, the very first Act of the Apostles, after CHRIST was gone out of their sight, was that commemorated this day;--the ordination of Matthias in the room of the traitor Judas. That ordination is related very minutely. Every particular of it is full of instruction; but at present I wish to draw attention to one circumstance more especially; namely, the time when it occurred. It was contrived (if one may say so) exactly to fall within the very short interval which elapsed between the departure of our LORD and the arrival of the Comforter in His place: on that "little while," during which the Church was comparatively left alone in the world. Then it was that St. Peter rose and declared with authority that the time was come for supplying the vacancy which Judas had made. "One," said he, "must be ordained;" and without delay they proceeded to the ordination. Of course, St. Peter must have had from our LORD express authority for this step. Otherwise it would seem most natural to defer a transaction so important until the unerring Guide, the Holy Ghost, should have come among them, as they knew He would in a few days. On the other hand, since the Apostles were eminently Apostles of our Incarnate LORD, since their very being, as Apostles, depended entirely on their personal mission from Him (which is the reason why catalogues are given of them, with such scrupulous care, in so many of the holy books):--in that regard one should naturally have expected that he Himself before His delegation would have supplied the vacancy by personal designation. But we see it was not His pleasure to do so. As the Apostles afterwards brought on the ordination sooner, so He had deferred it longer than might have been expected. Both ways it should seem as if there were a purpose of bringing the event within those ten days, during which, as I said, the Church was left to herself; left to exercise her faith and hope, much as Christians are left now, without any miraculous aid or extraordinary illumination from above. Then, at that moment of the New Testament history, in which the circumstances of believers corresponded most nearly to what they have been since miracles and inspiration ceased--just at that time it pleased our LORD that a fresh Apostles should be consecrated, with authority and commission as ample as the former enjoyed. In a word, it was His will that the eleven Disciples alone, not Himself personally, should name the successor of Judas; and that they chose the right person, He gave testimony very soon after, by sending His Holy Spirit on St. Matthias, as richly as one St. John, St. James, or St. Peter.

Thus the simple consideration of the time when Matthias was ordained, confirms two points of no small importance to the well-being of CHRIST'S kingdom on earth. First, it shows that whoever are regularly commissioned by the Apostles, our LORD will consider those persons as commissioned and ordained by

Himself. Secondly, it proves that such power to ordain is independent of those apostolical functions, which may be properly called extraneous and miraculous. It existed before those functions began; why then may it not still continue, however entirely they have passed away?

We must not pretend to be wise above what is written; but there is, I trust, nothing presumptuous or unscriptural in supposing that JESUS CHRIST, the great Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, purposely abstained from nominating St. Matthias in his life-time, in order that Christians in all times might understand that the ordained successors of the Apostles are as truly bishops under Him, as ever the Apostles were themselves.

For this is the constant doctrine of the ancient Church, delivered in express terms by our LORD in the text, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain."

It may seem strange that our LORD should deem it necessary to guard His Disciples against such a notion as that they had chosen Him, rather than He them: called as they had been, when they least expected it, from their daily employments of fishermen, publicans, and the like. But "for our sakes, no doubt, this is written;" to check an error which CHRIST foresaw would too generally prevail in His Church, especially in these latter days, which pride themselves so much on light and liberty. The error I mean is, that of imagining that Church communion is a voluntary thing, which people may adopt or no, (I will not say at their own pleasure, though too many go as far as that, but) as they seem to find it for the time most edifying. Another kindred notion is, that the Christian ministry is also a voluntary thing; that there is no real difference between clergy and laity, any more than is enacted by the law of the land for mere decency and order's sake; but that otherwise a man who can and will do good as a clergyman is to all intents and purposes a clergyman enough.

These are not very uncommon notions. But take them at their best, and are they in effect any better than as if St. Paul and the other Apostles had considered themselves as choosing CHRIST instead of being chosen by CHRIST? He who reasons so, is he not chargeable with setting up his own calculation against the declared will and system of our LORD?

Hear now on the other hand the very doctrine of the Church Apostolical. JESUS CHRIST, the chief Shepherd and Bishop, commits the pastoral office to whom He pleases; in the first place, to His Apostles, and after them, to all whom they, by the help of His ordinary grace, shall appoint; which latter proposition you have just heard clearly made out from the ordination of St. Matthias. Therefore, although there be many Bishops, yet the Episcopal office is but one. the lines of the true Catholic Church are drawn out, as the Psalmist says, to the ends of the world, over all lands; but trace them back, and they all meet in the same centre, JESUS CHRIST. Therefore it is all one Church, and not a thousand independent churches, as they would make it, who boast of choosing CHRIST, instead of humbly and thankfully acknowledging the choice which He has made of them, in that He has cast their lot within reach of His ministers and sacraments.

This view, so clearly deducible from the promise of our LORD, and the conduct of His Apostles, is most unanswerably confirmed by the whole history of the Primitive Church. Every where the Bishops were the chief pastors, and the government and order of the Church was vested in them. To separate from them, except they were proved grossly heretical, was accounted schism. Why? Because it was universally understood, that the Bishops were the connecting chain which bound the successive generations of

Christians to the first generation, the holy Apostles; nay, and to our LORD JESUS CHRIST Himself. For the believers of those days were made to the Church through the Apostles: so that if they broke off their connection with the Apostles, they broke off their connection with CHRIST.

Would you hear some of the very words of those holy men of old? Take the following, which are part of a letter written by St. Ignatius, the friend of the chiefest of the Apostles, when he was on the verge of martyrdom. They are some of his last words, written to warn the friends for whom he was most anxious, against the heresies which were springing up in the Church.

"By submitting yourself to your Bishop as to JESUS CHRIST, you convince me that you guide your lives by no rule of man's invention, but by the rule of JESUS CHRIST, who died for us, that ye, believing in His death, might escape altogether from death. It follows, of course, that in no part of your conduct ye separate yourselves from your Bishop: which thing also ye now practise."

No test could be shorter or more simple. "You are in communion with your Bishop, humbly receiving from him, or those by him deputed, the genuine word and Sacraments of JESUS CHRIST: therefore, I make no question but you are also in communion with our LORD JESUS CHRIST Himself; at least, as far as Church Privileges go; as far as I or man can judge."

Surely the holy martyr, St. Ignatius, was as good a judge of what Christian communion depends on, as any person can be supposed in our days. And we see that he judges of it, not by those tests which we now hear most insisted on; not by convictions, and emotions, and highly-wrought feelings; but by the simple fact of adherence to that system, which our LORD himself has established for our salvation. Now, we know from every page of St. Ignatius, what his view of that system was. It was the system of Christian ordinances, administered by Bishops, with Priests and Deacons under them. That, in the mind of St. Ignatius, was the sure mark of the Church of GOD.

Nor was this a mere private opinion of his: it was rather the constant tradition of the Church Universal. what is very remarkable, it was the tradition not only the sound part of the Church, but of the heretics also. In those early days, even those who corrupted the doctrine of the Church seldom or never dared to breathe any thing against the Apostolical Succession of her Bishops. To do so, if they possibly could, would have been greatly to their purpose; because one very plain argument by which their misrepresentations of doctrine used to be confuted, was by appealing to the traditional account of the same doctrines, preserved in many of the most famous Churches, by means of the regular succession of Bishops. Some of the Fathers thus reckon up the Bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, for more than three hundred years, from the time of the Apostle, and are thereby enabled to trace back as far the true interpretation of certain hard places of Scripture, relating to the great truths of the Gospel. The heretics who disputed those truths, no doubt, would have been too happy, could they have proved that the chain of tradition wanted a link; that the succession from the Apostles was not clearly made out, or that being made out, it signified nothing. But the ground they used to take was quite different. they never dreamed of denying the past succession: it was too certainly known to be denied; but they took very great care to secure a future succession for themselves. They hardly ever broke off from the Church, until they had got some Bishop to patronize their heresy: through whom they might continue the Apostolical commission in a line of pastors of their own.

Thus as well the enemies of the Church as her friends bore witness in those early days to a truth which too many of both seem now agreed on forgetting: That Episcopal Authority is the very bond which unites

Christians to each other and to CHRIST: so that it was apparently a kind of proverb with them, Without the Bishop do nothing in the Church.

What is more, the teaching of the Primitive Church brought this matter home to every man's own soul, not only on the general ground of submission to all our LORD'S ordinances, but because the bread and wine in the Eucharist was not accounted the true Sacrament of CHRIST, without CHRIST'S warrant given to the person administering: which warrant, the Fathers well knew, could only be had through His Apostles and their successors.

Hear again the same St. Ignatius. "Let that LORD'S Supper be counted a LORD'S Supper indeed, which is ministered by the bishop, or by one having his commission." Observe, Ignatius, the friend of the Apostles, reckons the Sacrament no Sacrament, if the consecrating minister want the Bishop's commission. Could St. Ignatius possibly mistake the mind of the Apostles on that point, he who had conversed familiarly with them at the time when the Church was used to "continue daily in breaking of bread?"

And with him agreed the whole Church of GOD for the first fifteen hundred years: knowing that when our LORD said, "Do this in remembrance of Me," His Apostles only were present; therefore non but they and their deputies could be said to have His warrant for blessing that bread and cup. And this is a matter pertaining to each man's salvation. For that bread and cup are the appointed mean, whereby the faithful are to partake of CHRIST'S Body and Blood offered for their sins.

Can any devout man, considering this, reckon it a matter of small moment, whether the minister with whom he communicates be a minister by apostolical succession or no? In the judgment of the Church it makes no less difference than this: Whether the bread and cup which he partakes of shall be to him CHRIST'S Body and Blood or no. I repeat it: in the judgment of the Church, the Eucharist administered without apostolical commission, may to pious minds be a very edifying ceremony, but it is not that blessed thing which our SAVIOUR graciously meant it to be: it is not "verily and in deed taking and receiving" the Body and Blood of Him, our Incarnate LORD.

Even as St. Paul seems to intimate, when he so pointedly asks the Corinthians, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the Communion of the Blood of CHRIST? The bread which we break, is it not the Communion of the Body of CHRIST? Why such a stress on the words, "which we bless," "which we break;" except because the Corinthians knew (and they could only know by Apostolical teaching), that the agency of the Apostles in blessing and breaking was needed to assure us that the holy signs really convey the thing signified?

Thus you see every thing concurs; the ordination of St. Matthias, the promise of our LORD, the hints found elsewhere in holy Scripture, the express laws of the Universal Church, the constant doctrine of the friends of the Apostles;--all agree to show that Communion with GOD incarnate, such Communion as He offers in His holy Supper, cannot be depended on without an Apostolical Ministry.

To think otherwise is the error of those, who, mixing up human inventions with the everlasting Gospel, take upon them to "choose CHRIST," instead of humbly owning themselves "chosen by Him," and labouring to bear fruit accordingly.

But still more fatal will be our error, if having this high privilege, we cause it to be reproached by our abuse or negligent using. We, by GOD'S blessing, are among those, who, through an Apostolical Ministry, have

constant access to the Body and Blood of our REDEEMER. What if we be found no more exemplary, no humbler, no more constant in our piety, than those whose possession of the means of grace is so much more questionable than ours? There is a prophetic warning against such: "You only have I know of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." There is also yet a more awful warning from Him who will come to be our Judge: "Thou, Capernaum, which are exalted unto Heaven, shalt be brought down to hell; for if the mighty works which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee."

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