



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (16th August) 2026

At the beginning of the Epistle this morning, we encounter what probably seems an unremarkable detail, but which was, in fact, a bone of contention between Saint Paul, as we now know him, and the Church in Jerusalem. Here, as elsewhere, Paul describes himself as an Apostle. For most Christians today, this probably seems unremarkable, but it was a problematic claim.

To understand this, we only need to consider what we would answer to the question, "How many Apostles were there?" We would answer, "Twelve;" and if pressed we would refer to the election of Saint Matthias after Judas abandoned his post to vindicate our response.

The twelve-ness, so to speak, of the Apostolic College was not some serendipitous phenomenon. As we learn from Saint Matthew's Gospel, the number twelve reflected the twelve tribes, which, in pristine times, composed the nation of Israel; and the call of the twelve Apostles alluded to the restoration of Israel being inaugurated by Jesus' Ministry.

In view of this - and since there was not a vacancy in the Apostolic College - Saint Paul's self-designation as an Apostle is problematic; and represents a shift in the significance of the title: either he was making, so to speak, a status-grab, claiming a standing equal to that of one of the Twelve or he was returning to the etymological roots of the word and simply asserting that, following the experience of his conversion, he had been sent to the Gentile communities by Christ.

Whatever his intention, in due course the Church validated Paul's claim to be an Apostle; and, in so doing, shifted the primary association with apostolicity to a pre-eminent status within the life of the early Church. Following the criteria laid down at the election of Saint Matthias - which, you will recall, was all to do with the number twelve - only first generation Christians - indeed only those who had known Jesus of Nazareth - were eligible to be considered Apostles.

This shift slowly morphed into a rather backward looking perspective: when we speak of the apostolicity of the Church or the Apostolic Succession, we are asserting a substantial rootedness of the Church in the first generation of Christians - and more narrowly those constituencies of that first generation gathered around the Twelve, plus Saint Paul.

The truth of this is, of course, unimpeachable; never-the-less, we should not let go of the other conception of the Apostles: the significance of the Twelve and its reference to the restoration of a renewed Israel. This is a forward looking perspective: and, in fact, the dominant viewpoint of Christian theology.

What we might term the gravitational pull of the Church's life and purpose is not to be found in what is past, but in what is to come: as we say, "We look forward to the life of the world to come."

Finally, of course, we should not forget the etymological roots of the word for an Apostle - one who is sent out. Saint Luke in his Gospel, as well as recording the Twelve of the Apostolic College, also uses the verbal cognate of the word used for an Apostle.

So, when we express our belief in the Church Apostolic, we should try to hold together these three elements: a Church, which is rooted in the teaching and practice of the first Christian generation; but which looks forward to the consummation of the divine Purpose for creation, even as it is already manifesting itself in our midst, and which is sent out in the present to proclaim that Purpose, achieved through the Redeeming Sacrifice of Christ.