

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2015

Preacher: Samuel Kow Arthur

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**HYMNS:** 300 "Hail the day that sees him rise"  
666 "Master, speak! Thy servant heareth"  
564 "O Thou who camest from above"  
566 "Take my life, and let it be"

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**READINGS:** John 17:6-19  
Acts 1:12-26

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### ***'WHO IS ON THE LORD'S SIDE?'***

A priest was shaking hands with people after church service. A couple greeted him and said, 'We listened carefully to every word you said.' The priest thanked the couple and said he looked forward to seeing them next week. 'Oh, we won't be here next week,' the couple responded. 'We're going to another church to get a second opinion.' The first Christian church had challenges right from its birth. In today's lesson Jesus had only recently ascended to be with the Father. Pentecost had not yet occurred. The disciples were in a kind of holding pattern, unsure of their destiny. In the meantime there was some 'maintenance' to be carried out in the organization he left behind. The disciples needed to ensure that the leadership of the church was strong and vital.

There were, by now, more than 120 people on the membership roll - the required number of Jewish males, by law to form a synagogue and in this case, a church. But there were only 11 leaders in the organization. One of the original twelve had been a traitor, Judas Iscariot. So they needed to find a replacement, a twelfth apostle, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. So after Jesus' ascension his followers returned to Jerusalem; they then went to the upper-room where they were staying before, to plan their next move. The group included all of the first disciples, and Jesus' mother, and his half-brothers, as well as the women who had been there at his crucifixion. The only person missing unfortunately was Judas Iscariot.

Simon Peter, who had emerged as the head of the group, stood up and addressed the gathering, telling them that, 'one of their comrades had fallen, and it was now their duty, their task to replace him. There was, however, one condition required: The person chosen as a replacement, must be someone who knew Jesus personally, he must be someone who had witnessed his death and resurrection first-hand. This would allow them to maintain the credibility of their witness.' concluded Peter.

It is important, my friends, that those who lead the church have a deep personal relationship with the risen Christ. Serving the church of Jesus Christ, my friends, *is* important business; in fact the most important business in the world. Leaders, who do not have deep faith in Christ and his mission, will not have the motivation and the commitment to serve and to lead the church successfully. When leaders are not what they say they are, it saps the energy of the organization they are serving.

Some of you may remember William Shatner who played Captain Kirk in the Star Trek TV series. He later became a leading figure, and a spokesman for Priceline.com, a multimillion internet website where people bid on hotel accommodation, air travel, car

rentals, and many more things. And yet, William Shatner admitted that he didn't even know how to operate a computer! Hello! Mr Shatner *is* a top representative for a global online service, but he does not know how to go online himself. Strange, very strange!. Does it happen in a church setting? I'm afraid, it does.

Mark Twain was for a long time, a critic of the Christian faith. As a matter of fact, at a certain stage, he completely lost his faith as a Christian; and here is why: As he was growing up, Mark Twain encountered church, leader, elders and deacons who owned slaves and abused them. He heard Christian leaders use foul language; he saw them practise acts of dishonesty and corruption during the week after speaking piously in the pulpit on Sunday. Twain listened to ministers use the Bible to justify slavery, and he was so disturbed by the bad teaching habits and poor examples of church leaders as a whole that he became bitter toward the Christian faith.

Unfortunately it happens sometimes, in church congregations. People judge us more by what we do during the week than by what we say on Sunday. The early church wanted to make certain that their message always rang true, so they chose people who knew Jesus first-hand, those whose lives had been transformed by Him, to lead the church. This is the only real test for representing Christ in a world such as ours. When we're called to serve Christ, we're not given an Intelligence Test or asked how many degrees, titles or awards we have on our profile. Only one question *matters*; do you know Jesus personally? You see, when Jesus is very real in our lives, we can do some dumb things and still be effective servants of God.

I was reading a story about a missionary in Haiti. And in his account he said, the worst part of being a missionary was the language. He said: 'it's miserable when you're unable to communicate the most basic aspects of life, from: 'Where's the bathroom?' to 'How much do you want for that mango?' In no time at all, you feel like the most stupid person on the face of the earth; like the time I told my house boy, 'Remember, I am dustbin,' instead of 'Remember to take out my dustbin.' He said, he tried very hard to share the gospel with a number of people; and the very first conversation he had along those lines went like this: 'If you accept Jesus Christ,' he said to one woman, 'he will take away all your dogs.' 'My dogs?' the woman asked, 'I don't have any dogs.' 'Everyone has dogs, madam,' he said, continuing his presentation without a clue that he was using the word for 'dogs' rather than the word for 'sins.' 'But when Jesus forgives you,' he said with finality, 'it is as though you never had a dog in your entire life.'

My best take, my friends, is about another missionary sent to Haiti....The word he had wanted to use on this occasion was 'mambo,' which means a voodoo priestess in the local language. Instead he said 'mamba,' which is the word for peanut butter. He gave several impassioned sermons about the dangers of Christians consorting with peanut butter in times of need. He later reported that sales of peanut butter fell in the area for a while as a result of his message. Fortunately, God doesn't require that you and I be intellectual giants in order for Him to use us. 'Only one thing is needful' said Jesus to Martha,' having an intimate relationship with Jesus.

In a Methodist church where I used to worship in Melbourne Australia in the early 90s there was an elderly man who was not only blind but also partially deaf. This man was

regular at all services and very punctual too. At one of the after-service tea times I overheard a conversation between this elderly man and a curious fifty-something woman. The woman asked the man why he bothered to come to church considering his medical condition. (The dumbest question to ask, I think). The man's answer was: 'Oh, it doesn't bother me at all to be here every Sunday, because I want the world to know, whose side I am on.' The woman obviously embarrassed by the 'ministration' of the 'disabled' gentleman, quickly left the premises without saying a word.

*My friends....* the early church wasn't looking for superstars but loyal servants, committed people, and dedicated leaders. And that's what the church needs today; people who know Christ and have a heart of service. .You see, in today's world credibility is everything. People today are cynical and suspicious. If we are not who we say we are, they will not listen to what we have to say. One of the most respected men in the USA is Senator John McCain. In his book *The Paradox of Power* Pat Williams says that one of John McCain's strengths is his ability to tell a story. McCain learned the power of stories while he was imprisoned in Hanoi during the Vietnam War. John had been raised on stories of the sea told by his father and grandfather, who were both admirals in the Navy. So, as a prisoner of war, it was only natural that he became the storyteller of the group. He would retell his favourite movies to the other POWs *scene by scene*. At Christmastime, his captors allowed him fifteen minutes with a Bible to re-read the Christmas story, then he retold that story to his fellow inmates later after dinner. In 1974, the then governor of California, who later became the President of the USA, Ronald Reagan, a gifted storyteller in his own right, invited McCain to speak at the governor's breakfast prayer meeting in Sacramento.

Though not a particularly religious man, McCain had a story to tell. He talked about being in solitary confinement in a hole at the basement of the prison. His entire world was squeezed down to a space six feet wide by nine feet long. On the stone wall of that hole, an earlier prisoner had scratched a message. The message read like this: I believe in God, the Father Almighty.' 'Those *seven* words, symbolic of the *seven* words spoken by Jesus on the cross that Good Friday,' said John McCain, sustained him through two and-a-half years in the dreaded 'Hanoi Hilton prison.' When McCain had finished telling his story, the entire audience, including Governor Reagan, was in tears. John McCain later recalled: I realised that it wasn't really me that moved them. It was the story that did it.' But, my friends, McCain was only partially right. Yes, it was the story, but it was also the fact that the man *who* told the story had lived it. That is what the world is hungry for, people who have lived what they believe. That is why the early Christian church set this requirement, that the 'replacement of the fallen comrade', needed to be someone who knew Jesus first-hand, the one who had had a personal encounter and experience with Jesus. That's what God is still looking for today. The question is, do you and I qualify? Is Christ alive in our hearts? If not, let us be reminded that time is not on our side. The sand in our Life's hour glass is steadily running out. When will it run out? I don't know, and you do not know. Only the one who holds and controls our lives knows.

One of the greatest Methodist hymns **of** faith and gallantry, MHB 820, which is sadly missing in the latest Hymn book 'Singing the Faith', was written by Mrs Frances Ridley Havergal who lived for only 43 years (1836-1879). The words of this great hymn encapsulate today's message, and I would like to close with the lines:

Who is on the Lord's side?  
Who will serve the King?  
Who will be his helpers  
Other lives to bring?  
Who will leave the world's side?  
who will face the foe?  
Who is on the Lord's side?  
who for him will go?  
By Thy call of mercy,  
by Thy grace divine,  
We are on the Lord's side;  
Saviour, we are Thine.

Jesus, Thou have bought us,  
not with gold or gem,  
But with Thine own life-blood,  
for Thy diadem.  
With Thy blessing filling,  
Each who comes to Thee;  
Thou hast made us willing,  
Thou hast made us free.  
By Thy great redemption,  
By Thy Grace Divine,  
We are on the Lord's side;  
Saviour, we are Thine.

Fierce may be the conflict,  
Strong may be the foes;  
But the King's own army,  
None can overthrow.  
Round His standard ranging,  
Victory is secure;  
For his truth unchanging,  
Make the triumph sure.  
Joyfully, enlisting,  
By thy Grace Divine,  
We are on the Lord's side:  
Saviour, we are Thine.

Chosen to be soldiers  
In an alien land,  
Chosen, called, and faithful,  
For our Captain's band,  
In the service Royal,  
Let us not grow cold;  
Let us be right, loyal,  
Noble, true, and bold.  
Master, Thou wilt keep us,

By Your Grace Divine,  
Always, on the Lord's side,  
Saviour, always, Thine.

***Are we, are you on the Lord's side or are you not? Amen***