

You do have to feel at least a little sorry for Barsabbas. Almost nobody has heard of him, and of those who have, most people will have confused him with Barabbas or thought that he is a spelling mistake. But Barabbas got lucky; he escaped crucifixion and vanished into obscurity. Joseph Barsabbas Justus wasn't lucky. He was short-listed but not chosen. He too vanished into almost as much obscurity.

Joseph Barsabbas was well-qualified for the role he didn't get. He had been one of Jesus' earliest followers. He'd been there when Jesus was baptised by John. He was probably one of the seventy disciples whom Jesus sent out to preach and teach. He was one of the people who met the resurrected Jesus, and he may have seen the Ascension. But for one reason or another he didn't become the replacement member of 'the twelve'. We don't know why, and we don't know why Matthias was found to be more suitable than him. Nor do we know how he felt about not being chosen. But we can be pretty certain that he didn't go off in a huff but stayed with the Jerusalem Christians. There is a tradition that he became the first bishop of Eleutheropolis. Even fewer people have heard of Eleutheropolis than of Barsabbas. It was a town on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza which became a major administrative centre for the Romans. Then it became a Palestinian town, which was almost completely destroyed in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Barsabbas is said to have been martyred and then commemorated as St. Justus of Eleutheropolis – but this tradition is so shaky that it doesn't even make it into the Oxford Book of Saints.

All this does make me think about not being chosen. Some of you may share with me the still-bitter experience, at school or in a group of playmates, of waiting to be picked for a game and being the last one left – the person that nobody wanted on their side. Most of us have applied for a job we didn't get. I'm not sure whether it's harder to be rejected at the final interview stage or to have your initial application turned down when they haven't even met you. And if it's an 'internal' job you then have to go back to working as before with colleagues who may well know you didn't make it. That's what Barsabbas would have had to do. Quite a lot of people, including some very well-known ones, are currently coming to terms with not getting the job they'd applied for (and in some cases already held).

People have various reactions to not being chosen; everything from 'I didn't really want the stupid job anyway', through 'I'll have another go and try even harder', to 'It's obviously not the right thing for me – I'll try something else instead'. As far as we can tell, Barsabbas simply carried on as an active member of the Jerusalem Christian community, trusting God to use him in the most appropriate way, and eventually ending up a few miles down the road in Eleutheropolis with his own little group of Christians to look after. We have to hope that no-one thought any less of him because he wasn't the chosen one.

There is a very significant difference between being chosen by people and being chosen by God. There is always a finite limit to the number of positions on offer in human organisations, and there will always be people who are disappointed. But there is no limit to the size of God's team. There is plenty of evidence throughout the Bible and particularly in Jesus' teachings that there is a place for everyone. People who set out to limit this have the wrong end of the stick, whether it is the Jehovah's Witnesses claiming that there will only be 144,000 people in heaven, or the Exclusive Brethren (very well-named) who are certain that only the people in their very restricted group will qualify. They have missed the point entirely. God's kingdom has room for everyone, and it needs

every conceivable sort of person. All that anyone must do to join is to recognise his call, repent and ask for forgiveness, follow Jesus' teachings and be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Of course this wonderful inclusivity brings two sets of problems. Some people who would dearly like to be included feel that they are just not good enough. They have to be helped to understand that God's love is unconditional. He doesn't expect perfection; he understands that we are all human and we all mess up repeatedly in endless different ways. But he still wants us to be part of his kingdom. Other people are certain that being chosen by God is so special that it shouldn't be open to everyone. How can they be 'chosen' if everyone else can be chosen as well? If being part of God's people is worth anything, surely there must be a cut-off point somewhere, and surely that cut-off point is somewhere just behind them? These people too must be helped to understand that God's love is unconditional, that their standards are not his standards, and that they have no right to judge anyone. As the first little group of Christians gradually learned, and as we shall remember next week, God pours out his Holy Spirit on everyone who is open to receive it. Let us pray that we may be as open and accepting as they were.