

## Bartholomew / Nathanael: sceptical but open to God

So what do you know about Bartholomew? If the answer is, 'Not very much,' welcome to the club. Neither does anyone else. He is named among the Twelve in the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke) but they record nothing about him as an individual. One tradition (as with Thomas) has him taking the gospel to India. In the catalogue of gruesome martyrdoms associated with the apostles, Bartholomew is distinguished by having been flayed alive: hence his symbol of a butcher's knife and his patronage of tanners and butchers. That's probably the origin of St. Bart's Church and Hospital in London, near the site of the Smithfield meat market. But today's readings and collect stick to the New Testament witness, or lack of it: hence their generality in referring to the apostles as a whole, rather than Bartholomew as an individual: Jesus' teaching that the greatest is the one who serves and his promise to the apostles of a symbolic place of authority in God's kingdom; and characteristics of the early apostolic church: meeting together, healing and growth. I always feel there's a hint of desperation about today's collect: *that we may love that word which [Bartholomew] believed and ... faithfully [both to] preach and receive the same*. Not that it's a bad prayer: basically we are asking God to foster in us an apostolic faith; keeping us on the right track in what shapes us and what we impart to others. Jesus referred to the Twelve both as *disciples* and *apostles*: disciples are those who learn and follow; apostles are those who are sent to convey the gospel to all. We pray that we may both receive and believe, and also preach: not necessary delivering sermons, but in our words and actions out there in the community.

Those twin identities are likely to appear in the Diocesan Strategy currently being developed. To counter the cycle of decline we may well feel trapped within, the strategy will aspire to see and facilitate *congregations of active disciples* (those who continue to learn from and follow Jesus' lead) sharing in a *missional* (outward-focussed) *vision and culture*. That may well feel some way from where we think we are: what we have is faithfulness, but amongst a decreasing number of the faithful. Attempting to maintain the cycle of the familiar may appear to offer us comfort; but it demands energy we may no longer have, and focusses our attention ever more inwards, rather than on the mission field around us. Given our limited numbers and increasing age, we might feel sceptical about our potential; but where God is, there is hope and possibility. In a video message, Bishop Jane speaks of this as a Psalm 22 moment for us: within that psalm there is a God-given point of transition from *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* to *I will tell of your name to my people*. We don't know what God did for and within the psalmist at that point; but it happened. We know more about what happened to the Jesus who prayed those words of despair on the cross; and was raised to the life he has shared with us, and sends us out to share with all.

And if we are initially sceptical, maybe today offers us some apostolic company. John's Gospel makes no mention of a Bartholomew; but amongst the disciples, both before and after the resurrection, is Nathanael, a name not found in the synoptics. If we equate Bartholomew with Nathanael (who has no separate saint's day in our calendar) then John gives us something to work with. Nathanael is introduced to Jesus by Philip, and is sceptical about the messianic potential of someone who comes from Nazareth, of all places. He is convinced when Jesus tells him that he knows that Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree when Philip brought the news; and that one day he would see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Jesus has already credited Nathanael with faithfulness and integrity; despite his initial scepticism, he is open to the possibility that he is wrong and might need to change his perspective: in the words of our Diocesan vision, he is open to being *Transformed by Christ*.

Today's Gospel reading emphasises how much those apostles-to-be needed the transformation of their discipleship: arguing on the road about which of them was the greatest! But the witness of the post-resurrection church demonstrates that they, bar one, were open to the possibilities and change that Jesus foretold and promoted among them.

The theologian H.P. Liddon picked up that theme in a sermon on this day towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:-

*It is a help to us ... – to you and to me – to remember that the Apostles of Christ did not become all at once what they were eventually. They had to struggle with weakness and errors of a fallen nature, just as we have. Like us, they had to curb temper and to check ambition; they did not begin on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel; they carried their treasure full many a year in earthen vessels, that the excellency of their glory might be of God, and not themselves.*