

A Sermon for the Feast of St Bartholomew
Preached at St George's Round Church, 2017, by Benjamin Lee

From our Lesson: *These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.*

And from our Gospel: *Jesus says, He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doeth serve. . . . I am among you as he that serveth.*

From the testimony of the Holy Scripture, we know very little about St Bartholomew particularly, whose feast we celebrate today. He is named once explicitly in each of the three synoptic Gospels, as among the disciples whom Jesus specially called and later commissioned as Apostles. In our Lesson from Acts he is said to have been among the witnesses of Jesus' Ascension, and afterwards with those in Jerusalem who *continued with one accord in prayer and supplication*. We should probably identify Bartholomew—which can mean simply, “son of Tolmai”—with the disciple named Nathaniel in John's Gospel (incidentally, Mathew, Mark, and Luke do not mention Nathaniel, and John does not mention Bartholomew). Following this traditional identification, we know that upon calling him, our Lord declared of him: *Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!* which, in turn, elicited from him a true confession of Jesus as the Son of God and the King of Israel.¹ According to later tradition, Bartholomew traveled to India to preach the word of God and there he left the Gospel according to Matthew. He is also believed to have brought Christianity to Armenia, where he was martyred. In one account, the manner of his martyrdom was beheading. But the more popular tradition holds that he was flayed alive and crucified upside down. Hence in iconography you can see St Bartholomew depicted holding, in one hand, the Word of God written, which he believed and preached; and in the other hand, a knife, and sometimes his own skin, which was the manner of his suffering unto death for the Gospel.

All of this we recollect and commemorate on the feast day of this great saint. But let us now especially bring to our attention the Lesson and Gospel appointed for this day in our Prayer Book. How do these readings speak to one another, and what connections can we make?

In our Gospel, the scene is of the disciples reclining at a table in a room in Jerusalem, at the so-called ‘Last Supper,’ when discord erupts: *There was a strife among them, of which of them should be accounted the greatest.*² The strife amongst the disciples prefigures the chaos shortly to ensue when Jesus would be betrayed, suffer and die on the cross, and descend into hell.

¹ John 1:47-49.

² Luke 22:24.

In our Lesson, again the disciples are gathered, in an upper room in Jerusalem. But they are now, in contrast, without Jesus, who had appeared to them in his resurrected body and then ascended into heaven; and in place of divisiveness and strife, they *all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication*.³

The disciples, it seems, have learned from Jesus how to pray, and they act with a unity of spirit. The Holy Ghost has not yet descended upon them, but we have here in that upper room an anticipation, a glimpse, of the church in her infancy; this is, after all, what the Acts of the Apostles is really about. In order to understand the conversion that has taken place—from discord to concord, from self-aggrandizement to bearing the burdens of one another—let us go back to that first scene in the upper room, and consider what Jesus had taught his disciples amidst their strife.

The disciples are arguing about the terms of preferment in God's kingdom. But Jesus rebukes them in their worldly way of thinking: No, Jesus says, the greatest shall be he who willingly undertakes the most menial of tasks, the humblest of roles, the least and lowest position of servitude. Jesus points to himself as the model: *I am among you as he that serveth*.⁴ And, of course, his words here anticipate the humiliation and suffering that he will willingly endure on Calvary.

As St Paul would put it in the letter to the Philippians: *Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant—a slave—and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*.⁵

Prayer, taking responsibility for one another, self-emptying, and humility—these occur somehow together.

Let's take a step back for a moment.

The parish of St George is currently without a rector, and we have a "Search Committee" tasked with both articulating and acting on behalf of our church's current self-understanding: a vision of who we are, what we are about, our *raison-d'être*. In this interim period, we as a parish are in a time of discernment. So, who are we?

Well, on the front of our service bulletin we tell ourselves and all those who come to worship with us:

³ Acts 1:14.

⁴ Luke 22:27.

⁵ Phil 2:4-8.

“In response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Parish of Saint George offers a unique combination of traditional Anglican worship and a commitment to Inner-City ministry. Open to the community that surrounds it, Saint George’s dares to be shaped by the Inner City, yet seeks to transform our neighbourhood by preaching, in Word and action, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. . . .”

Does this description of ourselves make sense? Is it true to what we are? Do these words express adequately our corporate life of prayer, and are these words which we can together offer to God in prayer, words of which we are not ashamed?

We are collectively in a time of discernment, but what does that involve? The parish, if it truly wishes to discern its vocation, must engage in self-examination, it must take account of its life of prayer, and discern its spirits. We must, as a parish family, go into the desert, to confront and unmask our demons; to strip away our pretensions, our complacent posturings, our self-congratulatory delusions. We must have the courage to be honest with ourselves, so as to put away guile and hypocrisies. We must turn far more radically inward, to get beyond the stories we tell about ourselves that are more fantasy than reality.

And turning inward, what may we find? Will we hear Jesus’ rebuke from last Sunday’s Gospel, when he entered the temple: *My house is a house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves.*⁶ Are we capable of hearing this as a word of judgment against us, as a rebuke of how we go about practicing religion in the Halifax inner city, as a critique of our own well-intentioned piety?

We have much to be thankful for as a parish church: beautiful and intellectually coherent Liturgy every week, with music which rouses the soul to worship; morning and evening Offices six days a week; a consistently strong Sunday School; a nascent Youth Group; a steady and substantial Adult Education program; Youth Net; Soup Kitchen . . . As such an active parish, no doubt we have many strengths, and much to be thankful for. There are many individuals who are dedicated to supporting and sustaining all this, and I should not wish to diminish or disregard the very considerable good that is accomplished through their faithful efforts.

But we must beware. For it is precisely in our strengths, in exercise of our virtues, that sin can creep in and subtly take hold of us. So often it is when we try to be strong and good that we prevent God from manifesting his power working in us and through us.

How is it that we are “open” to the community that surrounds us, if we don’t know our neighbours, and our neighbours don’t know us? In what way is St George’s a place of welcome—not only to regulars in the congregation on a Sunday—but indeed to the surrounding neighbourhood, to those on the margins of the church, on

⁶ Luke 19:46.

the margins of society? In what way is our church a place of radical hospitality in this community? How is it that we “dare to be shaped by the inner city,” if we do not see the face of Christ on Gottingen street?

The question before us today, on this feast of St Bartholomew, is, perhaps first of all, whether we are prepared to follow the Apostle’s example, who was open to divine grace, who, by the power of that grace working within him, knew himself as under the mercy of God, and thus was able truly to believe and preach the Gospel. St Bartholomew did not shrink from the hard and gritty work of prayer and all that it would demand of him, and I can only imagine that this was possible, because he had come to a saving knowledge of his own spiritual poverty, his own broken-heartedness before God. He truly believed the Gospel he preached, and truly preached the Gospel he believed. *There is sprung up a light for the righteous, / and joyful gladness for such as are true-hearted,* says the Psalmist.⁷ May it be so for us also. Pray for us, St Bartholomew.

Amen.+

⁷ Ps 97:11.