



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, August 24, 2008
The Feast of Saint Bartholomew

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Luke 22:24-30

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AUTHORITY AND FREEDOM OF SERVICE

But I am among you as one who serves.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

At Saint Thomas we take the opportunity during the long “green” season of “Ordinary Time” after Pentecost to observe the greater Prayer Book feasts of apostles and other saints when they fall on Sundays. This presents an occasion for a larger congregation to celebrate and to learn about some of the pillars of the Church, and today we have Saint Bartholomew, the Apostle and Martyr. He is the patron of our neighbors and sister parish, “Saint Bart’s” over on Park Avenue.

The name Bartholomew means “son of Tolmai.” This is a patronymic, what we could call a surname. Bartholomew appears on the lists of the Twelve Apostles called by Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Beyond being called and commissioned by the Lord and being faithful, that is all that is said about Bartholomew. However, Bartholomew traditionally has been identified with Nathaniel, who makes a spirited appearance in Saint John’s Gospel. Since Bartholomew is listed next to Philip in the first three Gospels, and since Nathaniel and Philip feature together in the Fourth Gospel, we see why the tradition and biblical scholars identify Nathaniel/Bartholomew as the same person, and we gain insights into this one apostle.

Here is Nathaniel’s spirited encounter with Christ. Nathaniel was brought by Philip to Jesus, skeptical about the possibility of a Messiah from Nazareth. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he had said. Nathaniel was astonished that Jesus knew him already, for Jesus greeted him, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.” “How do you know me?” Nathaniel asked. Jesus answered, “Before Philip called you, under the fig tree, I saw you.” “Rabbi,” Nathaniel exclaimed, “you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel.” Jesus answered him, “Because I said I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these. Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” Indeed he

would, for Nathaniel was one of those who saw Christ in his Resurrection appearance by the Sea of Galilee.¹

There are a few fragments from post-biblical history and tradition. The early Church historian Eusebius says that the Gospel of Matthew was found in a Hebrew edition in India between 150 and 200 and had been left there by “Bartholomew, one of the Apostles.” There is also an ancient tradition that says that Saint Bartholomew was martyred, flayed alive and beheaded, in Armenia.²

If Bartholomew (Nathaniel) is the straightforward, guileless, earnest soul, follower of Jesus and witness of the Resurrection that we have just traced, then I doubt he would be bothered by any lack of biography. He would have devoted his life to Christ and to the spread of the Good News about the Lord – and in that he would have found satisfaction. He would have heard today’s teaching from Jesus and realized that concern about who is greatest is beside the point. That unseemly dispute among the apostles about which of them was the greatest took place in the Upper Room during the Last Supper!

There they all were, jockeying for position, while one of them, Judas Iscariot, went out to betray Jesus. Exercising lordship over people, taking the titles which accrue from such power, are for the kings of the Gentiles, said Jesus. Not so among you: the greatest must be as the youngest; the leader as the servant. I am among you as one who serves, said Jesus, who had just given bread and wine as his body and blood.

Jesus confers privilege and authority upon the apostles, yes. They will have a portion in his kingdom. They will feast at his banquet in heaven. They will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. But not as the kings of the Gentiles: no, they will inherit all this by following their Lord, who not only gave them his body and blood under the forms of bread and wine but then was lifted up on the cross the next day in fulfillment, once and for all. This is the same Lord who that same night washed the apostles’ feet and told them do likewise; to love one another as he had loved them.

The authority of Christ, of the Apostles, and of the Apostolic Church is paradoxical. It is expressed in self-emptying service. Wrangling over status is out of place. Yet the paradox is: the more complete the service, the more clear the authority.

Ultimately, the Apostles, each in his own way, would not only serve after the pattern of Jesus; they would, one way or another, give their whole lives up to it, and most of them would also die the death of martyrs. There is something pure and exemplary in what we can glean about Saint Bartholomew; namely, in his honesty and lack of guile, and then in his reputed end, having delivered the Gospel with his life.

There is another paradox involved in the service which constitutes authority in Christianity. That is, in the words of a beloved Collect from Morning Prayer, the service of the Lord is perfect freedom. Whereas the service of earthly masters and powers is bondage or even addiction of one sort or another; the service of Christ is emancipation from these things. It is liberty, deep within the heart. It is the heart set free. The servant of Christ knows that he or she has a life-giving meaning and purpose in life, something to rise to each morning with joy and confidence. The servant of Christ knows that his purpose is to know God and to enjoy him for forever, and that in such knowledge is eternal life. He knows that life in service of this knowledge is indeed freedom, and he has confidence that, come what

¹ John 1:45-51; 21:2

² See the *vita* of Saint Bartholomew in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, Church Hymnal Corporation, p. 300.

may, he has God's care and defense, even in the face of fearful adversaries, through the wonderful, paradoxical "might" of Jesus Christ our Lord.

May the example and spirit of Bartholomew/Nathaniel, honest and guileless, self-effacing and serving, courageous and free, be ours, now, and forever.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.