



Tuesday 24th August 2021
21st Week in Ordinary Time Year 1
Saint Bartholomew, Apostle

Gospel

Jn 1:45-51

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

There is a true Israelite, in whom there is no deceit.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, the one about whom the prophets wrote: he is Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth.' 'From Nazareth?' said Nathanael. 'Can anything good come from that place?' 'Come and see,' replied Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming he said of him, 'There is an Israelite who deserves the name, incapable of deceit.' 'How do you know me?' said Nathanael. 'Before Philip came to call you,' said Jesus 'I saw you under the fig tree.' Nathanael answered, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.' Jesus replied, 'You believe that just because I said: I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.' And then he added, 'I tell you most solemnly, you will see heaven laid open and, above the Son of Man, the angels of God ascending and descending.'

Reflection By Fr Graham Fullick

When you visit Rome and drive from the Major Papal Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls (opposite where Fr. John Lovell, Fr. John Purnell and myself studied) and go to the Major Basilica of St. Peter, about half way along the Tiber River you come to Tiber Island. It is a small island in the middle of the Tiber with a hospital, formerly a leprosarium, and the Minor Basilica of St. Bartholomew, called Nathanael where relics of today's Saint, Martyr and Apostle Bartholomew rest under the main high altar. The church is open usually daily and I visited it frequently, not only because of its location, but also because it contains many relics of modern day saints from all around the world and was dedicated by Pope St. John-Paul II for that purpose. Because of the Fatebenefratelli Hospital opposite the church, the island became a rescue haven where Catholic doctors protected Jews in plain sight from the Nazis during World War II. The hospital was deliberately for incurable patients of a highly contagious invented illness named Syndrome K which faked cancer or tuberculosis. But fascinating as that is, let us go back to St. Bartholomew's (Nathanael's) call at the time of Jesus. I shall use the Apostle's names interchangeably.

St. Bartholomew had what we call a double martyrdom. He was both fixed to a cross and flayed alive. Logic tells us you would have to be fixed to a cross in order for the flaying physically to happen. St. Bartholomew is represented by three knives and in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco in saintly glory in heavenly empyrean holding his own flesh, even his face.

Nathanael is not initially directly chosen by Jesus, but brought to him by Philip who tells Bartholomew that he has found the Messiah. When St. Bartholomew does the home-town put down of asking what good can come from Nazareth, he is really begging the question for us. At this beginning of St. John's Gospel, and for history and generations to come, Bartholomew is asking for us "What is the messianic mission and meaning of Jesus? Is Jesus God incarnate, made man for our salvation?" Nathanael can scarcely know the unfolding of the Divinity and Man Jesus before him. He will learn this over three years of discipleship and become an apostle to the East, to India as it was known in the Ancient Near East and to Armenia among other parts subjected to argument among scripture scholars.

Jesus does not reprove Nathanael's not-too-subtle, boyish put down about lowly Nazareth in Galilee, but honours him by calling him not a Jew but "There is an Israelite who deserves the name, incapable of deceit" or in other translations, "incapable of guile". This is the only time in Scripture that God calls an Apostle "Israelite". Jesus redoubles the honour by saying he saw Bartholomew first "under the fig tree", an ancient, immediately known signification for the glory and integrity of Israel. Bartholomew thinks he is being led by his brother Philip to Jesus, but Jesus has known him before, seen him from afar before Philip invited him. St. Bartholomew could scarcely have known what he was meaning to say when he said back to Jesus "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel". Bartholomew has not called Jesus Lord yet, just Rabbi, but he puts himself below Jesus, i.e. at Jesus' feet wanting to be taught; teachable, a listening disciple in saying Rabbi. Better than that if, as Jesus says Bartholomew is an Israelite, then St. Bartholomew is answering back, if I am a noble

Israelite, Jesus are our Messiah and my King. In many ways we can relate to this sort of exchange as men at a barbecue chatting, taking the mickey and simultaneously risking teasing yet showing praise and appreciation simultaneously. Jesus himself says back to St. Nathanael, raising his sights yet letting him know that he is boss and “Nate” is hardly there yet: “You will see greater things than that...you will see heaven laid open and, above the Son of Man, the angels of God ascending and descending”.

In this little exchange the absolute depth of the true meaning of Christ’s incarnation, God’s coming as Man, in man, into the world is clear. Above and below this “talking” communication is the most human, risking, loving, bidding transaction of friendship of God to humanity. This is true “being and existence” Communication by Christ of the Christian dignity we are called to as humanity, personally in the coming of God as man. Our true humanisation is our sanctification in daily life. This passage shows the deeply sacramental nature Divine and human in Jesus, God come down to earth to raise us up. Jesus is the Sacrament of the Father. The Church of relational faith begins with Mary, Joseph and the Apostles, Bartholomew here. And it is incarnated in us in the Holy Communion of the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb of God who pitches his tent among us in his incarnation as Man on earth then and ever as now in Holy Communion in the Mass from the altar. “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” So it is for Bartholomew on his feast day, the Lord is there with him, raising him up to a greater existence, that he and we may have life and have it to the full.

We only learn in John 21:2 that St. Nathanael is in fact from Cana in Galilee where Jesus performed the first miracle of his Messianic revelation. That from a man of Nazareth in Galilee. That information about Nathanael comes when the truly known, incontrovertible Messiah has appeared after his Resurrection to Nathanael and the seven disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee and calls them, not Jews or Israelites, but “Children”. All the Incarnated Revelation has by then been shared in the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus with Nathanael and the other Apostles. The Holy Spirit awaits then for the infusion of All Truth, no guile, no deceit. Only guile and deceit crucified our Lord. But he did not revile in return. His name Jesus is to save his people. At the beginning of the Lord’s ministry, St. Nathanael was present to the Eternal Mystery in front of him, but he had a three year disciple’s apprenticeship to appropriate the true meaning of what he was saying: Rabbi, Messiah, King! And Jesus revealed it by his coming as Man, preaching, Works, Cross, Resurrection: the totality of Revelation in the Person and by the sacrificial person of Christ: priest, lamb, sacrifice and revelation—Splendour of the Eternal Father in human vesture.

We should notice too that the Jews, Nathanael included, would have been familiar with Jesus’ analogy of Jacob’s ladder and angels ascending and descending (Gen 28:12-17). But there the angels ascended and descended on a ladder. Here the bridge, the ladder is the person of Christ himself speaking with St. Bartholomew. If there is any ladder between heaven and earth, it is Jesus’ Cross! The spiritual ladder is God’s incarnation in the Person of Jesus, in his ontic Being. The spiritual life of God the Father is made flesh in Jesus. Jacob wakes from his dream about the ladder says “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” (Gen 28:16). There is a Shakespearian play within the play. Here today there is a (revelation capital C) Communication of God the Father within the (lower case c) communication of God the Son to Bartholomew. In the Old Testament, the angels used the ladder to and from heaven. In the New Testament Jesus has laid open the doors of heaven himself for the angels to flow freely: The Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and Son.

Jesus calls to the deeper spiritual self of all of us, not just saints, St. Bartholomew. This deep spiritual self is not of our making, but of God’s design, making and calling, the Immortal Soul, the inner life of God we are partakers in by means of our own inception of human life, worldly and divine. We must likewise appropriate its meaning and work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philp 2:12), seeking even initially as Bartholomew did. Jesus is the fig tree under Whom all our souls sit waiting to be lifted-up to our full, heavenly stature of pure love of God and neighbour. Jacob awoke and said “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven”. St. Bartholomew awakes in a tiny seed of faith to realise three years later, fully, that Jesus this man calling him now is indeed God Himself opening the Gate of Heaven in his Resurrection. Heaven has been Communicated into earth in Christ. He sits again on this altar and in this tabernacle. Dare we receive this personal Holy Communion into our souls at Mass? Dare we have the brotherly and sisterly bidding conversation of heart speaks to heart in the infusion of the life of God into our souls? Dare we live out what we have received in this Sacrament and in Christ’s Messianic mission and message in coming as Man, our true selves to be discovered and lived-out day by day? There is such a deep meaning of Sacrament in the words of the Eternal Word here today to St. Bartholomew—and to us in the Eternal Real Presence, the Word made Flesh. If we receive this Revelation truly, our lives cannot but be transformed. To be forgiven and open to Heaven’s descent is to be transformed for ultimate beatitude, blessedness and the doing, being and becoming good, better and finally with the Lord, beyond Best.