

BARTHOLOMEW - SOME THOUGHTS

We missed the celebration of Bartholomew this morning as the beastly Redemptorist sheets that we use here tied our hands. So this evening I felt that we really should make an effort to celebrate his festival day - which is actually today. And the first reading contains these wonderful words of God spoken in the oracle first Isaiah. You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. This morning we thought about the great declaration of Peter - later to be affirmed by Thomas: My Lord and my God. Now we come to the calling of Bartholomew.

Though Bartholomew is listed among the Twelve Apostles in the three Synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and also appears as one of the witnesses of the Ascension (Acts 1:4, 12, 13), each time named in the company of Philip, he is one of the apostles of whom no word is reported nor any individual action recorded in the New Testament.

Beginning in about the 9th century, the church linked Bartholomew with Nathanael, mentioned only in the Gospel according to John. In the Synoptic gospels, Philip and Bartholomew are always mentioned together, while Nathanael is never mentioned; in John's gospel, on the other hand, Philip and Nathanael are similarly mentioned together, but nothing is said of Bartholomew. Some Biblical scholars reject this identification, however.

In the Gospel of John, Nathanael is introduced as a friend of Philip. He is described as initially being skeptical about the Messiah coming from Nazareth, saying: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", but nonetheless, follows Philip's invitation. Jesus immediately characterizes him as "an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit". Some scholars hold that Jesus' quote "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you", is based on a Jewish figure of speech referring to studying the Torah. Nathanael recognizes Jesus as "the Son of God" and "the King of Israel". Nathanael reappears at the end of John's gospel

(John 21:2) as one of the disciples to whom Jesus appeared at the Sea of Tiberias after the Resurrection.

There are differences between the first 3 gospels and John over Jesus' calling of the disciples. The first disciples in the synoptics give up their work as fishermen to follow Jesus, but in the fourth gospel they give up a previous religious commitment as disciples of John. There is a greater sense in John that the battle is between two religious convictions, i.e., "the Jews" and "the Christians" -- than a movement from irreligious Jewish and Gentile sinners (e.g., fishermen and tax collectors) to Christian sinners who are forgiven.

The witness of the early church is of course of the utmost importance - without their courage and faith, the good news of Jesus Christ would never have reached the wider world. The witness of Bartholomew is described Eusebius of Caesarea's Ecclesiastical History which states that after the Ascension, Bartholomew went on a missionary tour to India, where he left behind a copy of the Gospel of Matthew. Other traditions record him as serving as a missionary in Ethiopia, Mesopotamia, Parthia, and Lycaonia.

Along with his fellow Apostle Jude, Bartholomew is reputed to have brought Christianity to Armenia in the 1st century - and the Armenian Church claims to be the oldest 'formed' church in Christendom. Thus both saints are considered the patron saints of the Armenian Apostolic Church. There is also a local tradition that Bartholomew was martyred at the site of the Maiden Tower in Baku, Azerbaijan, by being flayed alive and then crucified head down. The picture of Bartholomew in the Sistine Chapel shows the big bold Bartholomew seated, holding the flayed skin of his earthly body - and the face on that skin is clearly that of Michaelangelo. Whether he felt the Pope was flaying him I am not sure.

After his martyrdom in this country, his body is said to have been washed to Lipari (a small island off the coast of Sicily), where a large piece of his skin and many bones are kept in the Cathedral of St.

Bartholomew the Apostle. Holy Roman Emperor Otto II brought his relics to Rome (at the basilica of San Bartolomeo all'Isola) in 983. In time, the church here inherited an old pagan medical center. This association with medicine in course caused his name to often be associated with medicine and hospitals. Some of his skull was transferred to Frankfurt, while an arm is venerated in the Canterbury Cathedral today.

Well, enough of the wild and woolly tales of the past. What is clear to me is that Bartholomew/Nathanael knew the Lord. He said nothing worthy of record other than an upper class sneer at Nazareth. I have always thought that this was a pity. I do hope that I shall not go into the annals of time, known only for a rude joke or something. Eusebius, who was the nearest historian to the events themselves, tell us that he was given by God the task of missionary work in the East. I on the other hand have been called to the North!! Whether the gruesome tales of his end are true, and they may be, the simple fact of being able to give life totally in the service of the Gospel is certainly worthy of respect, admiration, and one which should encourage us all.

The other aspect of Bartholomew Nathanael which intrigues me is this: We are told that Jesus "finds" Philip. The historical present is used - a tense used when narrators imagine themselves (and perhaps their hearers) to be present at the events being related. We can do the same by translating it in the present tense:

v. 41 Andrew finds Simon and says to him: We have found the Messiah," (which is translated "Christ").

v. 43 Jesus finds Philip and says to him: "Follow me."

v. 45 Philip finds Nathanael and says to him: The one whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, we have found, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

The word 'heurisko' is used five times in these three verses. I'm not sure that "to find" is the best way to translate it. The most common definitions given by [Lowe and Nida] for this word are:

(1) "to learn the location of something, either by intentional searching

or by unexpected discovery;" and

(2) "to learn something previously not known, frequently involving an element of surprise"

It is the aspect of "unexpected discovery" or "surprise" that isn't translated well by our word "to find," which, I think, conveys more of the sense of "intentional searching". So when folk say that they 'found' God, I think this is not a good use of the word. If God wished to hide, we should never 'find' him.

According to the legend, the ruler Hiero II asked Archimedes to find a method for determining whether a crown was pure gold or mixed with silver. One day when Archimedes stepped into his bath and noticed that the water rose as he sat down, he ran out of the house naked shouting, "Eureka! Eureka!" "I have found [it]" forms of the same verb. He found out something by a happy chance.

I'm not sure that Andrew "finding" Simon or Philip "finding" Nathanael should be understood exactly the same way as them "finding" the Messiah. They went off looking for the person. When they 'found' Jesus, this was their Archimedes moment - their point of Happy Chance. But it seems that Jesus actually 'looked for' Nathanael - who was being a good religious man, reading the law under the shade of a sycamore fig - huge leaves almost down to the ground.

Philip and Bartholomew/Nathanael are closely linked. "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'" Nathanael then utters his only line in the play - "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip's response to these snide comments is instructive. Philip shows us an aspect of evangelism. Even though Philip is convinced that Jesus fulfills the promises of scripture, he doesn't argue with Nathanael. He simply invites him to "come and see."

Three times in John, the invitation, "Come and see," is given. The essence of all witness, including our own witness is to state what we

have seen and believe and then to invite others to come and see. We can't argue people into the kingdom.

Remember Isaiah: You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

We shall shortly have a 'back to church' Sunday. Are we prepared to say "Come and see?" When I was at school, I was involved in the National Young Life Campaign. We had school youth meetings in someone's home to sing and hear a message from scriptures. We had camps (on Sark - under canvas) to help equip us in knowledge of Jesus and of the scripture. We were "evangelical" and many of us wore a lapel badge with NYLC on it, and a crown and a sword. When asked, "What's that?" We'd answer, "Come and see."

We need more of that, more of the Philip, and more of the commitment of a Bartholomew in the church today. Let us pray especially for the back to church initiative across the country, and do our bit for it too.