

Revd. Simon Lewis

Sunday 23 August

Isolation Radio Talk

Trinity 11

I Corinthians 4.9-15

Humankind can control all things has proved an illusion.

Good morning.

Meet Bartholomew. In the first three Gospels he is just a name added to the list of the disciples: nothing more. But in John's Gospel he is given a speaking part but not by the name Bartholomew. By an ingenious look at the evidence he is possibly the person named Nathaniel.

You see, in the first three Gospels Bartholomew is always associated with Philip; the clue then comes in St John, who tells how Philip went to Nathaniel to tell him that they had found the Messiah – and Nathaniel asks where he comes from in Galilee – 'Nazareth', is the reply. Nathaniel – or Bartholomew - then says; 'Can any good come out of Nazareth.' Make of that what you will: discrimination; prejudice? Listen on.

There is very little known about him but he takes his place in the stained-glass list of saints for that very reason; unknown saints are as close to the heart of God as any whose light shines bright in the story of the Church.

In our church in Ubley, at the east end, left of the high altar is a stained glass of St Bartholomew, or someones interpretation of him. Maybe if you're passing on a Thursday morning, between 11.00am and 12.00pm when we are open for prayer, pop in and have a look and ponder about him and what I am about talk about.

As you all know first impressions are important. And I find this particularly to be true of people, and whatever clouded judgement I later bring, those first impressions *generally* stand up to scrutiny: I trust that instinctive response.

So when I ask you to reflect on Bartholomew you see a tension; there is not one but two first impressions and they may not be compatible. In the Acts of the Apostles (the book about the early experience of a Church discovering and exploring its identity) the first impression of the disciples, is as possessed of such spiritual power that people crowded the streets to hear them and to bring the sick for healing. A closer look shows that some kept well away; 'not 'daring to join with them' is how the writer of The Acts puts it (Acts 5.13). Power can be very frightening.

In the gospels (e.g., Luke 22.24 +) you get a different idea; well, perhaps not so different. It looks like a debate about power - who is the greatest, who is the most powerful - and, you are encouraged to read this on St Bartholomew's feast day. Now if ever there was an anonymous disciple, Bartholomew is the one. So perhaps Bartholomew was at the centre of the discussion that prompts Jesus to speak about the power of service. Had Bartholomew passed some negative remark about practical religion; about faith in God giving rise to service of others. Did he despise those who faith was not intellectual or devotional or mystical? We do not know. But it calls from Jesus a question and a response – 'Which of you is the greater?' he asks. And then say's, He Jesus Christ, has come to serve.

We are the inheritors of centuries of tradition that relies heavily upon a God who controls the Universe to the last detail. Still today some hold God responsible for rainfall and harvest, sickness and health, reward, and punishment. The moral implications of this have always been frightening.

Earthquakes, and flood, infant mortality, accident, disease, genocide, famine, Covid19, few Christians will hold God responsible; for others if God will not come to our aid then either there is no God or God is a tyrannical creator. Right at the heart of our Christian faith - our relationship with God - is the knowledge that God is standing in the very middle of our pain and suffering.

God then, does not cause human suffering but shares with us in it. It presents the possibility that God, as Creator, gives up being all-powerful, in order to witness the destruction of Creation. John Taylor, onetime Bishop of Winchester voiced the opinion that God is at risk and the consequences are not certain. We could overturn the whole thing, he said, but God would be still be there, starting again.

In good theology God does not manage the events of history; God works in it; God is seen by all those who invite his love to blossom, flower and come to maturity in their lives. God, through Christ, and in the power of the Spirit needs your hands and hearts quietly and thoughtfully, anonymously perhaps, each to be a Bartholomew, and to stand and be counted.

This is where and why the Christian life is filled with hope; it is an adventure of being drawn into the life and love of God and taking our part in holding together. Alas it is also a truth, that many people do not see their lives as whole or as part of some greater continuity. All of us may be scarred by life; but the quest for a warm and beating heart at the centre of our Universe, whom we call God, is all about taking broken-ness seriously. It is not about pretending that fragmentation does not exist, but about accepting disturbance on the way to wholeness, because you sense that wholeness is what a Creator would want, what God wants for you.

Always compare the best with the best; despite much evidence to the contrary the Christian faith, *at its best and practised faithfully*, is a religion of hope, and even more, a transforming and integrating force. It is a faith bound under God. God is the Father, the Mother, creative yet remote; the freedom giver, and the one who lets go, as all parents must. (Metaphors are the language we have to understand our relationship with God.) God is the Son who experiences the reality of daily living; who serves rather than is served; whose love transforms and changes. God is the Holy Spirit who calls out the faithfulness of all people in each generation. You are invited to live a worldly holiness in your daily living; it does not mean that holiness can be compromised or half-hearted. You may be in the world up to your neck and still hold your heads high. The world is marked with the footprints of God's presence. In the Church (the gathered community of those growing and nurturing their lives with God at the centre) you seek the image of God's holiness. If the world was made by God then the Church *must* be like God.

Like me, you will remember your failure of love and your Christian calling. Like me, you will be aware too much of a failure to live like Christ and to speak of him clearly. Like me, you will not make the mistake of claiming the Church is the Kingdom of God, yet you will not underestimate the high calling to which you are summoned ... or the possibilities the glory of God will bring you.

Of Bartholomew we know nothing; he was a disciple who followed Jesus; that is what Christians want to do. One of the things I like about Bartholomew, he is the Patron Saint of Cheesemakers and I like my cheese.

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let us pray

Lord, make us like you,
that our souls may be the stained glass
through which your light and purpose
bring beauty and meaning into the world.
Through our lives and by our prayers,
your kingdom come.
Amen.