

Sunday 24^h August 2025- Feast of St. Bartholomew
At St Bartholomew's Burnley

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Bartholomew our patron saint, one of the lesser-known saints and one of the 12 apostles. He is mentioned at number 6 in the 3 Gospel (Mathew, Mark and Luke) and at number 7 in the list of book of Acts. Some particularly the cricketers amongst us will suggest he is somewhat down the batting order hence why there is little known about him. A common view of scholarship however identifies Batholomew with Nathaniel and whether fully convincing or otherwise this view has become a common starting point.

While I acknowledge this parish church and the small community who call it home, it has for me a special place as it is where I came to faith as a young adolescent boy, from anon church family with testosterone all over the place. I did not come for faith but to play basketball in the hall. The parish hall at the time was the centre of community life with wedding receptions most Saturday, funeral wakes and sport. There was a kindergarten and tennis courts. Fr. Lyle McIntyre in the 1960's would be seen in the local Grand Hotel most nights mixing the working men and even on occasions my father told me shouting the bar.

It is suggested that Bartholomew preached and travelled in India, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt and on the shores of the Black Sea. The manner of his death we are also unsure, some suggesting beheading, others that he was flayed alive and crucified. His relics are thought by some to be preserved in the Church of St. Bartholomew in the island, at Rome.

From the account we have in this morning's Gospel from John {Nathaniel}, Bartholomew appears initially hesitant and doubtful when he first meets Jesus. He was aware of the surroundings from which Jesus had come and grown up. His words 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth', suggests surprise and astonishment that others would recognise in Jesus the fulfilment of what the prophets and Moses had foretold and waited for, 'from Nazareth! Is his surprised response to their claims'?

Immediately we are told Jesus recognises Nathaniel and calls him to be one of the chosen 12. Nathaniel responds with the words "Rabbi, you are the Son of God". This is a truly remarkable response, given his earlier scepticism and doubt. This is a response with "Damascus like overtones". The Gospel writer then concludes with a major statement about the personhood and identity of Jesus – "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man". In these brief words Jesus is proclaimed as the Messiah, the intercessor – between humanity and all of creation and God, or as Luke says in his Gospel, this Jesus is both Lord and suffering servant, the fulfilment of the prophetic tradition and the long-awaited Messiah.

So we begin with doubt, then we encounter conversion, and finally commitment in Bartholomew.

Today we are confronted with many who doubt, few who seem to convert and fewer who commit themselves to the call of Jesus. While Christianity in the West seems to be in decline, the opposite is true in many parts of Asia and Africa.

On reflection over many years I was attracted to the Anglican Church for four reasons having previously attend Sunday School at the Church of Christ across the road now the Greek church for a number of reasons,

Firstly, its outward approaches of engagement with the local community. Prior to joining this congregation, as I have already said the parish had the colourful Vicar Father Lyle McIntyre, known locally for his biretta and for his visits to the local pub where his ministry became well known. The parish was very outward looking and engaged with people in their local struggles.

Secondly, I was attracted by the quality of worship, the mystery, colour and joyful presentation of the Eucharist. Again, I was attracted by the annual Good Friday procession of witness around the streets of Burnley.

Thirdly the extensive teaching provided by such well known luminaries such as Fr. David Robarts, Fr. Bert Smith, Fr. Esmond Leaver, Ray Wilson and Charles Bailey just to name a few. It was Fr. Bert Smith who taught me how to read the bible.

Fourthly, the fellowship that we shared in this parish community. St Bart's for me stood as a vibrant living expression of faith to a vulnerable searching adolescent and teenager, often confused and certainly taunted for his search for God.

Research into the history of St. Bartholomew's Burnley suggests that Batholomew may have been a tanner by trade and appropriate to the parish given the number of local tanneries along the Yarra River. The

sheath, knife and bible are his symbols. On a more pragmatic note I suggest the name of the Parish Bartholomew was probably linked to the presence of St. Bartholomew's Burnley in the United Kingdom, hence also the association with the tanneries.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning from Deuteronomy we read of the promise of the prophet to come. From a New Testament and Christian perspective we may be inclined to interpret this to be Jesus. Prophets have a chequered history in the life of Israel. Many were rejected, others killed, some banished. They were not always welcomed, listened to or followed. In general prophets were men and women who understood and believed that they had a special vision and knowledge of God's longing for a relationship with his people and for the pursuit of a just community.

Many prophets received their inspiration and commitment from a vision, or dream or conversation with the divine, eg. Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Several of the Old Testament prophets notably Jeremiah recorded their reluctance and resistance to the divine command and suffered in the process.

As a youngster I remember regularly attending the Yarra Bank Speakers Corner located on Batman Avenue on a Sunday afternoon where the Tennis Centre now stands, listening along with hundreds of others a wide range of speakers ranging from the Communist Party to the League of Rights, including a smattering of religious speakers predicting damnation and a fiery ending for us all of us unless we responded immediately to their call for salvation. I always admired their determination and more crudely "guts" in standing up for their beliefs or

cause amidst the cruel heckling and abuse from the on-lookers and the occasional tomato or egg. Likewise, I remember standing alongside a young man in the city (corner of Russell and Burke Streets if I remember) who to my surprise began preaching and shouting out texts from the Bible amidst the crowd of on-lookers and hecklers. In a similar way to those on the Yarra Bank, while I had some difficulties with his message I admired his tenacity. I recalled the trepidation I first felt when I had to speak in public and not to a hostile crowd but to a sympathetic one.

Of course, history is full of men and women who have spoken out or in favour of some cause or another. We know of Nelson Mandela, Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King and Gandhi. Thankfully we still have men and women and organisations with the courage and capacity to speak out on issues which need comment and to rustle the feathers of community and government.

Tenacity, holding on to strongly held beliefs in the face of criticism and adversity is not easy. The Christian disciple or follower today is likely to find himself in that position and increasingly amongst Australians who have grown sceptical of the institution of the church if not God. Ask any teenager who has an interest in Christian faith today about the taunts received at school. How many of our so-called Christian schools present a lively and robust faith perspective amongst the demands of the curricula, the same is true for adults. I found in my work experience, often at odds with the Church hierarchy challenged by the church's failure to listen to the hurts and brokenness of so many people.

The calling of Bartholomew however reminds us how ordinary people, (not those with rank and privilege) are called by God to follow him and to tell his story. This does not mean that all have to stand on street corners shouting our lungs out, or speak at every rally but rather does impose on us using our every day common experiences at home, at work and at leisure to live out by word and deed the faithful and unconditional love of God. I'm sure that this is what Bartholomew saw in Jesus when he responded immediately. He saw one who was prepared to share his generosity and hospitality with others. Yes, we need at times the tenacity and confidence of the Yarra Bank speaker or the Russell St evangelist. We need to be confident in our faith in the story we have to tell and yes we will experience rejection and abuse. Despite this the confidence we demonstrate in telling the story will have its impact.

Like Bartholomew most of us will remain unsung and silent saints and heroes of the faith. Each day in our every-day life as we go about engaging with the community around us we have the opportunity to share the good news, to live our lives as icons of Christ. Faithfulness not success in worldly terms should be our goal.

The immediate results of our endeavours and engagement may not be evident, but the seed is planted. Mathew in his Gospel sums it up in four words:

1. Light – we are to be the light in the darkness shedding hope.
2. Salt – we are to be those who persevere, that we are in there for the long haul.
3. Leaven – we are to be the inspiration to other, role models
4. Seeds – we are to be planters of seeds of hope.

The call to be a follower of Jesus is a privilege and a responsibility. The calling of Bartholomew reminds us how the ordinary, day to day person is chosen by God for this task. It reminds us, that while we are sinners we are all called to be saints of God. Don't then be down hearted or troubled by our apparent lack of success at times, our confusion, our anxiety and our timidity, but rather let us talk up, stand up and shout out the good news of God's love and forgiveness, his compassion and justice in a world so be-devilled by its own self righteousness and self centredness. Like Bartholomew we are called to lighten up, to be a bright vision, to promise hope and to work for the building of a better world.

The future of our Communion, our Church and our community may rest not on those who hold power and authority but, on the men, and women of faith who faithfully seek to live out the commands of God to love God and to love their neighbour. So be it for us all.

Amen.