

St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 3 May 2026

(Fifth Sunday of Easter – St. Philip and St. James)

Today we celebrate the feasts of Saints Philip and James the Less to distinguish him from James, both apostles.

These men, like the other disciples handpicked by Jesus, were ordinary human beings. Jesus is speaking to them on the night before his death to reassure them. They each had their unique human gifts and talents, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. They followed him not always understanding who he was or the fullness of his message. There maybe some of us who feel the same way at times. Our journey through life may change as we discover more about the call of discipleship. I have known people who would once have described themselves as non-believers who suddenly or gradually begin to seek alternate answers to life's mysteries.

As I have said previously Jesus called and commissioned the disciples to do extraordinary things. He fully understood their humanity. They misunderstood Him, let Him down, and argued among themselves... but He never gave up on them!

His grace was sufficient for them to accomplish great things, empowered by the transforming grace and energy of the Holy Spirit.

During the season of Easter we hear how following their hopes for a new and mighty regime, to overcome the authority and

abuse of both the religious and political leaders of the time, his crucifixion left them initially grieving, fearful and disappointed and unsure of their future.

Today we are also drawn attention to Domestic violence, and we should add violence of any sort. We are drawn in the Gospel into the question what we mean by home, in drawing attention to the words of Jesus in responding to the anxiety of the disciples, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. It is vision of belonging together of family of community where we are gathered together within the life and grace of God.

Life is not always as it should be. Abuse, exclusion, violence is experienced in many different ways. Today's Gospel shows and affirms an alternative.

We all live by stories throughout our lives. Stories help shape our way of life, the rules we live by and our ability to understand the world, its purpose and our meaning within the cosmos of all that exists. As we gather on this Feast Day we are invited to reflect on not only on Philip and James Apostles and their journey of faith but who we are, as the community of St Barts in this community at this time in history.

Let me ask you the following questions. What is your framing story? What story is given prominence in your

life? What consequences has it had on your sense of identity, purpose, and relationships? Has it from time to time caused you doubt or troubled you in what you have witnessed throughout your life. I am aware that many people lost their Christian faith following both World War 1 and 2. I find myself troubled by my faith when I witness particularly the abuse of children and lose confidence in how a good God could allow such incidents, and of course there are many others. I sometimes, in reflecting on events and incidents that defy explanation search for an answer that reflects the unconditional love of God and find it wanting not in God but in humanities abuse of the created order and in acts of inhumanity to others. The current troubles in the Ukraine, the middle east, the plight of the people in Myanmar and Syria are four examples not to exclude the exploitation of sacred lands and workforces by some multi nationals in parts of Australia, Asia and Africa.

At home I am challenged by the reports and incidents of violence that are on the increase , particularly

against women, encouraged by social media and on the increase among young men.

The Christian faith is filled with stories. From the very first book of Genesis scripture is packed with stories of writers, poets, story tellers, philosophers, and theologians of the time who tell in story how they understood the creation of the world and the divine mystery we call God. Communities of faith came into existence by storytelling, initially in oral form shared among people. Later Jesus spoke and taught about the Kingdom of God by story telling many in parables that would connect with the lives of those he spoke.

Lives are transformed when stories are shared. During my time at Anglicare and the Melbourne City Mission, my own life was expanded by the stories I heard of pain and suffering of children, young people, and families. I gained new insights into domestic violence, why young people resorted to drugs and why others

left home or were abandoned. Stories help us understand ourselves, our prejudices and lack of knowledge and the stories we value ultimately shape who we become.

What story is the Church telling today? Some of the stories I hear coming from the church and church leaders leave me perplexed because it is not what I hear from the Jesus I have read about in scripture, seen in the life of those who experience suffering and pain and far distant from the values of the Kingdom of God I believe have nurtured and grown my faith.

Simple cliches or bible verses without context are insufficient. Jesus listened to those who were often on the outside , struggling with life, had been excluded or looked down upon. What is the image, presence and voice of the Church do we here at St Bartholomew Burnley show. In my younger days growing up in this parish this church was the centre of much community

life. Today despite gallant efforts it sits on the edge like most churches even those who claim otherwise. Most Churches over the past few years, have experienced a decline in numbers attending, a decline in giving, and an increasing age in membership. I sense in some quarters a sapping of energy, disappointment, a lack of confidence, low morale among some clergy and even some anger. The pandemic had unexpected consequences not foreseen. That these things have affected us is understandable, but this does not tally with the God of abundance.

There are core activities that we could embrace more fully to demonstrate our liveliness as a faith community and a more intergenerational DNA. We can invigorate our story by humility, listening, prophetic, speaking out for others, varying some of our liturgy to context of the day, not by compartmentalizing our life together but by

believing that we as a church are led by the disturbing spirit of God.

Rethinking our story and our relationships with others offers us a chance to come together in new and exciting ways conscious and respectful of our past, to celebrate difference, to affirm God's love, to be open to the disturbing spirit of God and to be present in the community. While entering a new story maybe frightening we are confident that God stands with us.

Amen