

Feast of St. Bartholomew

August 24th 2016

Revelation 21:9b–14
Psalm 145:10–13, 17–18
John 1:45–51

Today's is the Feast Day of Saint Bartholomew. He was one of the twelve.

It is believed that Bartholomew and Nathanael are one and the same person. Nathanael's name is never mentioned in the other three gospels; and in the Fourth Gospel Bartholomew's name is never mentioned. Now, in the list of the disciples in Matthew 10:3 and Mark 3:18, Philip and Bartholomew come together, as if it was natural to connect them. Remember it was Philip who introduced Nathaniel to Jesus, as we read in today's Gospel and so for their names to be adjacent in the list of the Twelve seems natural.

Moreover, Bartholomew is really a second name. It means Son of Tholmai or Ptolemy. Bartholomew must have had another name, a first name, Nathanael.

He was reported, by various ancient traditions, to have carried the gospel through the most barbarous countries of the East, penetrating into the remoter Indies.

Saint Bartholomew's last whereabouts was into Great Armenia, hundreds of kilometres to the north and east of Palestine. There he preached in a place obstinately addicted to the worship of idols. Greek historians who were his contemporaries say that he was condemned by the governor of Albanopolis to be crucified. Others affirm that he was flayed alive – that is skinned to death.

Today's Gospel shows us something of the true character of Nathaniel Bartholomew. He is a man who is guileless and therefore receptive to the truth.

When Philip mentions to him "we have found the man of whom Moses and the prophets wrote about", Nathaniel quips:

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

There was nothing in the Old Testament which foretold that God's chosen one should come from Nazareth. Nazareth was a quite undistinguished place. Nathanael himself came from Cana, another Galilaean town, and, in country places, jealousy between town and town, and rivalry between village and village was notorious. Nathanael's reaction was to declare that Nazareth was not the kind of place that anything good was likely to come out of. Philip was

wise. He does not try to argue with Nathaniel, instead he brings him to Jesus. Jesus recognizes the sincerity of Nathaniel's question and then makes his famous observation:

Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!

Nathanael was surprised that anyone could give a verdict like that on so short an acquaintance, and he inquired how Jesus could possibly know him. Jesus told him that he had already seen him under the fig tree. What is the significance of that? To the Jews, the fig tree always stood for peace. Their idea of peace was when they could be undisturbed under their own vines and their own fig trees (cf. 1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4). Further, the fig tree was leafy and shady and it was the custom to sit and meditate under the roof of its branches. No doubt that was what Nathanael had been doing; and no doubt as he sat under the fig tree he had prayed for the day when God's chosen one should come. No doubt he had been meditating on the promises of God. And now he felt that Jesus had seen into the very depths of his heart.

It was not so much that Jesus had seen him under the fig tree that surprised Nathanael; it was the fact that Jesus had read the thoughts of his inmost heart. Nathanael said to himself: 'Here is the man who understands my dreams! Here is the man who knows my prayers! Here is the man who has seen into my most intimate and secret longings, longings which I have never even dared put into words! Here is the man who can translate the inarticulate sigh of my soul! This must be God's promised Anointed One and no other.' Nathanael capitulated forever to the man who read and understood and satisfied his heart.

It may be that Jesus smiled. He quoted the old story of Jacob at Bethel who had seen the golden ladder leading up to heaven (Genesis 28:12–13). It was as if Jesus said: 'Nathanael, I can do far more than read your heart. I can be for you and for everyone the way, the ladder that leads to heaven.'

On that day Nathanael was forever changed. His guileless heart was so receptive to the truth who is Jesus that his life would be spent and offered in the service of the Man from Nazareth. For in Jesus Nathanael saw the true, the good and the beautiful.

Nathanael Bartholomew, pray for us that we too more fully see what good came from Nazareth in the person of Jesus.