



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells  
Cathedral, preached on Sunday 24 August 2025 by  
the Reverend Rosey Lunn, Priest Vicar**

## **St Bartholomew**

*Acts 5, 12-16; Luke 23, 23-30*

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I don't *know* a lot about him – and yet I feel that Bartholomew and I are old friends - one of the churches of which I was Rector for 8 years was dedicated to St. Bartholomew, so every year about this time I would focus my thoughts on him in order to say something meaningful to the faithful congregation who gathered there each week. And to be honest, it was something of a challenge, because in fact little is actually *known* about Bartholomew.

A suspiciously recent (ninth-century) tradition identified him with Nathaniel, John's gospel describes how it was Philip who brought Nathaniel to Jesus, saying 'We have found him.....' - but Nathaniel's cynical reaction was 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' But Jesus, when he saw Nathaniel, said to him: 'Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no guile.'

Luke twice mentions Bartholomew as one of the Twelve. He is named in Luke's gospel, in ch. 6, v.14, and in Acts. In Matthew's list of the Twelve (10.3) and in Mark's (3.18), just as in Luke's two lists, Bartholomew comes after Philip. At last, here is something historical to hang on to: that multiple witnesses put Philip and Bartholomew together. The name "Bartholomew" is Semitic, meaning something like "son of the furrows"

Eusebius of Caesaria's *Ecclesiastical History* states that after the Ascension, Bartholomew went on a missionary tour to India, where he left behind a copy of the Gospel of Matthew. The Roman Martyrology says that Bartholomew preached the Gospel in India and then went to Greater Armenia, where along with his fellow apostle Jude "Thaddeus", he brought Christianity, and is said to have converted the Armenian King Polymius to Christianity. As a result, in 301, the Armenian kingdom became the first state in history to embrace Christianity officially. But tradition has it that he was subsequently flayed alive and crucified head down (some accounts suggest he was beheaded) by

Polymius' brother Prince Astyages in revenge and in fear of a Roman backlash. Hence the rather gruesome illustration on the cover of today's order of service - avert your eyes if you are of a nervous disposition.

In the chancel of my St. Bartholomew's church was a banner, which I was told had been given by a previous organist in memory of his mother. I couldn't work out at first what was the meaning of the shapes on this banner – until someone explained that these were flaying knives. An odd choice, I thought, for a memorial to one's mother – maybe he had been naughty as a child, and she had threatened to 'flay him alive'?

But however Bartholomew met his death (and there are other stories), the tradition grew that he was put to death as a martyr, and so it became the tradition for red, the colour of martyrs, to be worn on his feast-day.

Bartholomew, it seems, met a brutal and bloody end - and his name is permanently associated with brutality and blood because of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which took place on this day in 1572, when 5,00 Huguenots were massacred for their faith during the French Wars of Religion. Yet, perhaps because of his horrific death, Bartholomew also became associated with the arts of healing, so he also has hospitals named after him – thus he represents both the worst and the best of human nature.

So here I am again today with St. Bartholomew – remembering that a former choir member in my former church had written a hymn in his honour which was sung every year, and began with the uninspiring phrase 'Bartholomew, that obscure saint.'

'That obscure saint' – perhaps that sums it up: that it doesn't matter how little we know of Bartholomew; he did his job and earned his place among the saints of the Early Church, and we honour his memory, tenuous though the connections are, because he simply played his part in the story before the tide of events moved on and swept away the evidence we should now love to know about.

'The obscure saint.' I am reminded of those memorable words from the prelude of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, as the author reflects on the heroine Dorothea's passionate longing for some lofty ideal of saintly service and accomplishment, such as that of Saint Theresa; yet she writes:

'Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far resonant action.....with dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thoughts and deeds in noble

agreement, but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness... Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long recognisable deed.'

Well, who knows? Bartholomew himself was an obscure saint, and we shall probably never know anything more about him. He was part of a movement which did indeed begin in obscurity – the little band of followers of Jesus, a carpenter from a small town in Palestine – but within ten years that small group had such a reputation in Jerusalem that we read in Acts that 'many signs and wonders were done through the apostles – none of the rest dared to join them – but the people held them in high esteem.'

Bartholomew himself may have been obscure – but he was part of something much greater. Whatever cynicism had surrounded his joining the followers of Jesus, he was now caught up in a powerful new movement which was to have a huge impact on the whole world. But it hadn't been an easy success story, as we well know; there had been fierce opposition, and Jesus himself had been arrested, tortured and crucified.

Our gospel reading comes from the eve of the crucifixion, as Jesus speaks to his closest friends – presumably including Bartholomew - at the last Supper: they have been having a silly argument among themselves about who is the greatest.

What nonsense, in view of what is about to happen – what does status matter, in such a dire situation? Jesus reminds them of what they have been through – 'You are those who have stood by me in my trials', he says. This is what really matters: not fame or status, simply being faithful, holding fast through thick and thin, remaining loyal, not giving up.

And so we have the Church today, going through tough times, wondering what the future will be; an apparently diminishing group of people who somehow keep the faith, and believing that the future is in God's hands, and we must each play our part faithfully.

'You are those who have stood by me in my trials.' There may have been silly arguments in the past - arguments about status, about 'who is the greatest'. There may be dissent, division and disillusion in the Church; it is sometimes hard to keep going. Perhaps the future will not be easy. But the faithfulness is what matters, not the status; the faithful witness to a truth which is so much

greater than any of us individually. And if our witness is true, people will see beyond us and beyond our imperfections and weaknesses to something special. And here's a bright chink of light amid the encircling gloom, to cheer us on this St. Bartholomew's day:

Last Saturday's Times newspaper had a double spread article entitled 'Full fat faith -the young Christian converts filling up our churches', and one of the two churches cited was that of St Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield, a church which embraces beautiful and traditional worship, where you have to search for a seat at the 11.00 a.m. Sunday service: a regular congregation of over 200, including the many young adults, who are remarkably fervent, genuflecting, bowing and crossing themselves, most pray on their knees with their hands clasped together and their eyes tightly shut.

It seems that it is precisely Christianity's marginal status that gives it attraction. No doubt it gladdens Bartholmew's heart, in the courts of heaven!

I am a great admirer of the American Catholic writer, Dorothy Day, born in Brooklyn in 1897. Though in her home God was never mentioned, she grew up to be fascinated by religion and by stories of the saints, and felt that she wanted to discover what the Christian faith was all about. She describes how, as a child, she came into contact with a simple Catholic woman, the mother of one of her childhood friends, and the huge impact this woman's faith made on her:

'It was around 10 o'clock in the morning that I went up to Kathryn's to call for her to come out and play. There was no-one on the porch or the kitchen. The breakfast dishes had all been washed. Thinking the children must be in the front room I burst in and ran through the bedrooms. In the front bedroom, Mrs. Barrett was on her knees, saying her prayers. She turned to tell me that Katherine and the children had all gone to the store, and then went on with her praying. I felt a burst of love towards Mrs. Barrett that I have never forgotten, a feeling of gratitude and happiness that warmed my heart. She had God, and there was beauty and joy in her life. All through my life, what she was doing remained with me. There were moments when, in the midst of misery and class strife, life was shot through with glory. Mrs. Barrett, in her sordid little tenement flat, finished her dishes at 10 o'clock in the morning and got down on her knees and prayed to God.'

'She had God, and there was beauty and joy in her life' – the secret of a saint?

What a difference an obscure saint can make. What an impact even ordinary – obscure – people can have on others, simply by living out their faith in small ways.

Each one of us is called to be a witness, because if we don't pass on the story to others, who will? So here in Wells, we are all called to be 'obscure saints'. Quietly bearing witness to what we believe – by acts of kindness and generosity, by our willingness to forgive, by speaking the truth, by our tolerance, humility and gentleness, by being a healing presence, by being courageous when necessary – and in doing so, gaining the high esteem of those around us.

Perhaps part of the unease with saints is that they seem like spiritual super-heroes, their sheer ordinariness being airbrushed away and the celebrity treatment applied. It feels as though, as we often sing on All Saints' Day, 'We feebly struggle; they in glory shine. Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine' – and arguments about rank and status are simply irrelevant; though we are many, we are one body, united in solidarity with our Lord, and encouraged, cheered on, by that great cloud of witnesses – the saints, the celebrities, and the obscure ones!

And to conclude, a sonnet by Malcolm Guite: 'The Gathered Glories'.

*Though Satan breaks our dark glass into shards,  
Each shard still shines with Christ's reflected light,  
It glances from the eyes, kindles the words  
Of all his unknown saints. The dark is bright  
With quiet lives and steady lights undimmed,  
The witness of the ones we shunned and shamed.  
Plain in our sight and far beyond our seeing,  
He weaves their threads into the web of being.  
He stands beside us even as we grieve,  
The lone and left behind whom no-one claimed,  
Unnumbered multitudes he lifts above  
The shadow of the gibbet and the grave,  
To triumph where all saints are known and named;  
The gathered glories of his wounded love.*

