

St Bartholomew's Day 2012 – 350th Anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer.
Acts 5¹²⁻¹⁶, Luke 22²⁴⁻³⁰

St Bartholomew the Apostle. What do we know about him? There isn't very much in the Bible about Bartholomew, except for the fact that he was one of the original twelve apostles. Generally he is thought to have been the same person as Nathanael, who at first sat under a fig tree and, despite Philip's testimony, refused to believe that the Messiah could be someone Who came from lowly Nazareth, but who, when He met Jesus, acknowledged him as the Son of God and King of Israel – of which more later. Bartholomew was a witness of the Ascension and tradition has it that he was a missionary in Armenia and India and possibly Ethiopia and Mesopotamia. Under the provisions of the Act of Uniformity which received royal assent on 16th May 1662, the Book of Common Prayer was required to be introduced into all parishes by St Bartholomew's Day 1662 – the event which are celebrating this evening. A festival, then, of the early Church, of the English Reformation and of the Church today.

First of all, the early Church. Our Acts reading is about the dynamism of the early Church. Forty Days after Easter, Jesus ascended into Heaven, having commissioned His Church to complete the work which God the Father had given Him to do. The Good News of salvation must be proclaimed to the whole world. This work would be accomplished by the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of the Risen Christ, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, Who would fill the Church and inspire Christian people to recognise God as Father and Jesus as Lord and to take up their cross and follow Him as conduits of God's Love in a fallen world. On the Day of Pentecost, ten days after the Ascension, the Holy Ghost came upon the apostles as a rushing mighty wind and in tongues of fire. The apostles proclaimed the Good News to the multitude and that very day three thousand people repented of their sins and were baptised and received the Holy Spirit. So the Church was born, the Body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Ghost. They were filled with the Spirit, filled with the love of God. They shared their possessions. They lapped up the apostles' teaching and preaching. They met together every day to worship in the Temple and broke bread in one another's houses. Their communal life and their individual witness were such that men and women were drawn to them and the Church grew rapidly in numbers, but their sheer dynamism inspired such awe, fear even, that others were afraid to approach them. In this fellowship of love and the Spirit, miracles of healing took place at the apostles' hands. Such was the early Church.

Our Gospel reading describes events a few weeks before the phenomenon I have just described. The scene is the Last Supper, the night before the Crucifixion, the oblation of himself once offered to be a full, perfect and sufficient, sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world, the Atonement which would rend the veil between Creator and Creation, opening the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers, and making it possible for the Comforter to come, the Paraclete, our Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the life and soul of the Church. But all that was still to come when Jesus shared the final Passover meal with His apostles. Bartholomew and the others were confused, probably frightened, sensing great things, yet not knowing what to expect. If the Kingdom of God was imminent, where would they stand? Who was going to be chancellor? Who was going to be head of the armed forces? Who was going to be Home Secretary? Which of the apostles was going to be

Archbishop of Jerusalem? Jesus had to tell them that leadership means service. To be a Christian means to be like Christ, to love like Christ, to sacrifice self on the altar of service to God and to humanity. To be a Christian leader – an apostle or bishop or priest, or king or prime minister, or parent or teacher - to have any position of authority or influence, means all the more to be like Christ, to walk in the footsteps of Him Who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The early Church. It didn't last. Christian kings, princes and governors, yes, and bishops and priests, came to enjoy exercising lordship and being called benefactors, just like the kings of the Gentiles. They got used to being ministered unto, rather than ministering to the needs of others. The intense fellowship of those early days didn't last. By the time the Roman Empire was calling itself Christian, being a Christian was just ordinary. There was nothing special about it anymore. When the Empire became Christian, the danger of martyrdom disappeared, but so did the challenge. What was special about being a Christian? People had their babies baptised. They attended Communion every Sunday. But did they love one another as Christ loved them? Did they feel an imperative to share their faith with an unbelieving world? Were they more honest than other people in their business dealings? Were they less ruthless in their politics? More faithful to their families? More generous to the poor? More peaceful in their dealings with other nations? What difference did it make for an individual to be a Christian or for a country to claim to be part of Christendom? My answer would be that it made a big difference, but not a big enough difference. Mediaeval Europe was a very much better place than it might have been without the influence of the Catholic Church, but it was nothing like as good as it should have been if we measure it by the standards Jesus set.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had gone badly wrong. A division had been created between ordinary Christians (the laity) and the clergy and members of religious orders. Less was expected from the laity and more from the clergy, but the clergy often fell far short of the standards of piety and education that ought to have been expected. The Church wasn't turning the world upside down; it was reinforcing its structures. Money had become far too important. Spiritual power was in the hands of the few, the few who could read the Bible and the service books in Latin. The simple message of salvation in Christ alone had been confused by a complex Theology which seemed to imply that a place in Heaven had to be earned or even that it could be bought by judicious donations to the Church and to charities. The Church needed to be reformed. Indeed the Church always needs to be reformed. *Semper reformanda*, always to be reformed, because Christian people are human. The flesh lusts against the spirit and we continually fall short of being what God calls us to be. The Church on earth is never perfect and is therefore in constant need of reformation.

The Protestant Reformation of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries recovered three great insights: sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura; by God's grace alone, through faith alone, by Scripture alone. It is by God's grace that we are saved. Our salvation, our relationship with God depends on God alone. There is nothing we can do to earn His love. There is nothing we have to do to earn His love. He just loves us. We apprehend this truth through faith alone. We don't have to do anything else. Only believe. *Abraham believed God and it was*

counted to him for righteousness. St Paul puts it this way. *For by grace are ye saved through faith.* So all believers stand before God on equal terms. There is no distinction between ordinary Christians (the laity) and the clergy or the religious. Priests, monks and nuns are no closer to God than any other Christian and nothing less is required of any Christian than is required of the greatest saint – to follow Jesus. All Christians are in fact saints, because it is Christ Who sanctifies us. *Sola scriptura* means that the Bible tells you everything you need to know about God. You don't need a priest or a bishop or the pope to tell you what to believe. You can read the Bible for yourself. You will be wise to be guided by biblical scholars and by the faith of the Church, but, ultimately it is between you and the Bible and God. So Protestantism was a great influence on the development of concepts of individual freedom and therefore of democracy. The only ultimate authority is God and every individual believer has access to God in Jesus Christ. Conscience, therefore, must be respected and it isn't much of a jump to believe that everybody has the right to express an opinion and that everyone has a right to a say in the way things are done – freedom of speech and democracy. The protestant religion had a tremendous influence on the constitution of the United States of America and the development of similar ideas in Europe and the rest of the world. Because the individual needs to be able to read the Bible for himself, the protestant religion has played an enormous part in the promotion of literacy, which, in turn, has underpinned the development of a more general universal education.

The English Prayer Book is a product of the English Reformation. The services themselves are in English (not Latin). The underlying doctrine is the reformation doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. The book promotes the reading of Scripture by clergy and laity alike. It contains a great deal of teaching material, intended to produce an educated laity who would understand the Christian faith and be transformed by their personal knowledge of Jesus into Christ-like people inspired by the Holy Spirit to complete His work of love in the world. As today's Collect puts it, that we should love the Word which Bartholomew believed and that we should both preach and receive the same. The original intention was that clergy and laity would meet daily for Morning and Evening Prayer (reading together most of the Old Testament once and all of the New Testament [except Revelation] three times in the course of a year) and that they should also come together on Sundays and other holy days to share in Holy Communion. That is a consummation still devoutly to be desired, but I hope we do our best! *Common Worship*, which is what we mostly use in this parish, is in the tradition of *Common Prayer*, with similar objectives. As to whether it is better or worse at achieving those objectives, opinions will differ.

Finally I want to return to Nathanael, who is probably Bartholomew by another name. Philip was all excited about Jesus and tried to get his friend Nathanael to come and meet Him. For reasons of pure prejudice, Nathanael was unwilling to go, but, when he met Jesus and realised that Jesus knew his innermost being, he confessed *Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.* And Jesus told Nathanael he hadn't seen half of it yet. *Hereafter you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.* The reference is back to Jacob's ladder, when the patriarch Jacob had a vision of heaven open and a ladder reaching up to God. He said, *how dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.* Jesus connects heaven and earth. He opens for us the way to God. Jesus is the Way. It is in worship that

we are at one with God. It is through worship that we are transformed. *But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.* What we are celebrating tonight is not specifically the Book of Common Prayer but the privilege of worshipping God from which everything else follows. It is in knowing God that we have eternal life. It is through worship that the Church becomes what she is. It is in worship that Christians become what we are. It is through worship that the world will be saved.

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.