

Feast of St. Bartholomew, Apostle  
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

## THE ALMOST ANONYMOUS SAINT

Hosea 6:1-6; Galatians 3:15-22; Luke 10:23-37

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Y**ou don't hear most Lutherans talking about the saints very often. There is almost a natural Lutheran aversion to calling someone St. so and so. And some people almost break out in hives at the mention of saints' days. After all, why should Lutherans keep a saints' day. We don't pray to them as the Romans do or as the Eastern Christians. We don't light candles before their statues. We don't venerate their relics. And we certainly don't expect miracles to happen at their shrines.

And yet every Lutheran liturgical calendar that I have ever actually seen has saints' days included in them. Lutherans keep these days, not so much to honor the particular saints, but because the lives of these men and women give us examples of faith in Christ that is both confessed and lived. The Augsburg Confession says: "Our churches teach that the remembrance of saints may be commended to us so that we imitate their faith and good works according to our calling." And so today we commemorate the holy Apostle, St. Bartholomew.

So what do we know about St. Bartholomew? What makes him one of the great icons of faithfulness to whom the Church has given the title of Saint. Well, to be perfectly honest, we know almost nothing about St. Bartholomew. His name appears only four times in the New Testament, and then only in the listing of the Twelve. The name Bartholomew doesn't appear at all in St. John's Gospel. But the name Nathaniel does. And he is likely the same person as Bartholomew – Nathanael being his actual name and Bartholomew as sort of surname meaning "son of Ptolomy". If this is the case (though some pretty important people like St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom didn't think it was) then we still know precious little about the man. All we know is that he was a friend of Philip and was called by Jesus after having been seen by our Lord sitting under a fig tree. We know that he was acquainted with the Old Testament scriptures, and that he was skeptical of anything good coming out of Nazareth, but that he then confessed Jesus to be the Son of God and the King of Israel. We also know from John 21 that he was from the town of Cana and saw the risen Christ along with some of the other apostles by the Sea of Galilee.

There are traditions, of course, about the life of Bartholomew. Some have said that he was a wealthy man, based upon conjecture about his being related to the Ptolomy family which had ruled Egypt. We are told by ancient sources that he, as an



Apostle, brought the Gospel to India and to Armenia; and that he suffered a gruesome martyrdom there for his preaching of Christ. But whether or not these traditions are completely correct, there is little in them to distinguish Bartholomew from the hundreds of other martyrs and saints that have died for their confession of Christ.

So why do we keep St. Bartholomew's day? One of the reasons simply has to do with his office as an apostle. He was one of the eye-witnesses of Jesus earthly ministry. He saw Christ's work first-hand, witnessed His death and His resurrection. And then He went out as did the others after Pentecost and proclaimed that Gospel to the world. That alone makes him worthy of our remembrance.

But I also find another reason that this day is a good day to keep. Bartholomew's relative anonymity teaches us something in itself. The Gospel, you see, is never about the preacher who brings it, but is always about Christ. There should be no doubt that Bartholomew was a faithful preacher. But he was so because he did not preach himself, but Christ Jesus whom he had known and followed and believed.

And why did Bartholomew believe that day when Philip first brought him to Jesus? Was it really because Jesus had seen him under the fig tree? If so, then he was likely to believe almost anything, wouldn't you say? No it was not because Jesus had seen him ahead of time, but because Jesus had chosen him. Of course, Nathanael Bartholomew could have rejected Christ's calling; but knowing the Scriptures, and having heard Philip's confession, and then finally meeting Christ Himself, he believes Jesus to be the one whom Philip said he was. And this confession, Jesus Himself tells us later, could not have come from Bartholomew unless it had been given to him by the Holy Spirit. For when St. Peter makes the same confession much later, Jesus says (Matthew 16:17): "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." And St. Paul tells us (I Cor. 12:3): "no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." The Spirit worked faith in Bartholomew through the Scriptures, and through the confession of the St. Philip, and then through the voice of Jesus Himself. And faith once brought into being confesses what it believes: "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Jesus then said to him: "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these... Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." This, of course, is a phrase that brings to mind Jacob's Ladder, where the patriarch had a dream of a ladder connecting earth and heaven with angels ascending and descending upon it, a pathway if you will between God and men. And perhaps the saint thought to himself what great things he would eventually see. But the vision Jesus had in mind was not one of outward glory, but of suffering and of a cross. You see the ladder between heaven and earth is Christ Himself. And He bridges the gap at His incarnation where the Divine Son of God becomes a human being. But the gap is not removed until the Divine Man dies and thereby removes and atones for the sin that separates mankind from God, and then rises again to lead man into new life and into heaven itself.

Bartholomew witnessed all of this with his own eyes. He saw the Divine Man Jesus suffer. He witnessed his death. And then after three days he saw Him alive again in the upper room, and then later at the Sea of Galilee and then he saw Him ascend into heaven. And he believed and trusted that all of this was done to save him and the whole world. But even then, as an apostle of the risen and ascended Lord of heaven and earth, he did not experience outward glory. He endured

the hardship of an apostle, carrying about in his own flesh the suffering of Christ, just as all of the apostles did. And then having faithfully preached the Gospel, he also suffered death on account of it. He lived by faith and he died in faith, for Christ had chosen him and had mercy upon him.

And this is what Christ has done for you too. And the pattern of St. Bartholomew's life is to be the pattern of yours as well. No you have not seen Christ's death and resurrection with your own eyes. But you have had a part in it through Holy Baptism. No you have not heard Christ call you to follow him as Bartholomew did, but you have heard Him claim you as His own when He sealed you "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." No you will not witness Jesus' preaching and miracles firsthand, but you have heard His word as it has been preached and taught to you, and you have partaken of His miraculous power in the Sacrament of Holy Communion where He makes His body and blood present in bread and wine for your salvation.

Now our Lord does not expect you to take what you have received from Him and go to India or Armenia. He does not necessarily expect you to suffer martyrdom, to be flayed alive and then crucified and at last after all of that agony to be beheaded; for that is what tradition tells us happened to Bartholomew; but He does expect you to confess your faith right in the places He has called you to be, to vocations not of apostles, but of fathers and mothers, employers and employees, teachers or students, rulers or citizens, and of fellow Christians to one another.

And while He promises you glory in the end, the glory of life in heaven, there are always going to be trials and crosses here in this life. As St. Paul says: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." You may not suffer as much as Bartholomew did, but if you faithfully confess Christ, you will find rejection on the part of some, hatred on the part of others, and perhaps one day even violence. But none of that matters in the end; for like Bartholomew's, our lives are covered by Christ. His grace has been extended to us and we have believed. "We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." And He who is the Son of God and King of Israel will not abandon us, but will keep us by His grace, after all He has died for us, risen and ascended for us. And sent His apostles and saints to bear witness to us that we might know and believe; to whom belongs all honor and glory now and forever, Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧