

A sermon by David Wilbourne for St Bartholomew's Day

Bartholomew was one of the twelve apostles,
listed in
Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts.
But other than being named,
the New Testament makes no further mention of him,
which makes my job this morning a tad difficult.

As a preacher I'm good at making bricks out of straw,
but I do need the straw.

A hymn writer
obviously had the same difficulty,
when he penned the following two opening lines
to celebrate today's saint:
'O blessed St Bartholomew,
How little do we know of you!'

Thy hymn goes downhill from there.

Not as bad as the hymn writer who
was obviously scratching around
when he celebrated St Mark
with the following ill-chosen lines,
musing

'When you were a lad did you wist'

- wait for it -

'that you'd be St Mark the Evangelist!'

I don't think it's healthy for a boy
to do a lot of wisting,
especially churchy wisting.

I used to know a little lad who wist (i.e knew) he'd be a vicar,
and his quite obnoxious piety worried me quite a lot.

But whatever,

I wished I wist something more about St Bartholomew
to tell you this morning.

There are one or two leads,
but they are based on really quite flimsy evidence
that a Morse or a Lewis would find risible.

One is that Bartholomew is a surname,
son of Tholomew.

Since Bartholomew isn't mentioned in John's Gospel
but Nathaniel is,
was Nathaniel (meaning gift of God)
Bartholomew's given name?

Nathaniel who exclaimed when first told about Jesus,
'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'
which I suppose we would paraphrase as
'Can anything good come out of Hull?'

Jesus sees Nathaniel at a distance
and reads him like a book,
pronouncing he is man without guile.
That doesn't mean he's overdosed on Gaviscon
but is someone who is as straight as the day is long.
Nathaniel, who clearly knows he is a man without guile,
is so impressed by Jesus' clairvoyance
that he hails him as the Messiah,
the Son of God,
and signs up as a disciple there and then.
We don't hear of him again until the very end of John's
Gospel,
when the risen Jesus appears to the disciples by the
lakeside
after they have toiled all night and caught nothing.
At Jesus' say-so, they land a record catch,

with the breakfast of all breakfasts

with 153 fish on the menu.

Other legends have Bartholomew/Nathaniel

taking Matthew's Gospel to India,

and finally being martyred in Armenia;

it's assumed that all the apostles suffered martyrdom,

hence red being the colour of their day,

the colour of blood.

Then Bartholomew leaps through the centuries

and gives his name to leading teaching hospitals,

which nursed our disease-ridden ancestors out of the dark

ages.

What more can be said?

In a society which is obsessed

with the tedious minutiae of celebrities' lives,

there is something highly attractive

about having a celebrity,

Christianity's unknown soldier

about whom

we know absolutely nothing.

The Book of Ecclesiasticus celebrates those

who have perished as though they had never existed,

yet who were godly folk,

whose righteousness has not been forgotten.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians

fires off a marvellous series of oxymorons

in describing the apostles:

impostors yet true,

dying yet alive,

sorrowful yet always rejoicing,

poor yet making many rich,

having nothing and yet possessing everything,
and finally
as unknown and yet well-known.

That fits Bartholomew to a tee.

We know nothing about him,
yet every church throughout the world
is celebrating him today:
unknown yet well-known.

There is something positively Christ-like
about not trumpeting your faith and witness,
not rattling off your list of good works
like the Pharisees in the market place
who receive Jesus' fierce censure.

Rather Christ presents us with a call
to be secret disciples,

to let our devotion and all that springs from it
be something hidden from those around us,
but not hidden from God.

To be always trumpeting what marvellous Christians we are
seems to me to be a lack of faith
rather than being evidence of faith,
because God knows everything,
we don't need to shout with our voices and with our lives
to remind him.

There was a wonderful poster some years back,
an advert for Christmas,
featuring a silhouette of a church
which had the air of neglect about it.

The caption?

God knows who goes to church these days.

It depends where the emphasis lies.

God knows who goes to church these days.
We might not know anything about Bartholomew.
But God knows,
and that's absolutely all that matters.
Like Bartholomew,
it doesn't really matter what record we leave of our deeds.
Never mind in 2000 years time,
in 200 years time we'll be little more than a name,
like those names on the incumbents list
on the aisle wall,
either infamous or their lives forgotten.
But that doesn't mean our Christ-likeness
won't have made the world of a difference.
Don't seek greatness, don't seek fame,
Christ implores us in our Gospel.
Seek service.

Perhaps Bartholomew was too busy serving
to write his star-studded autobiography.
And just his connection with Christ was enough.
Quite enough.
If just the passing of Peter's shadow
could bring healing and restoration,
Christ's kindly shadow passing over guileless Bartholomew
gave him more than enough fame
to be known yet unknown
for a whole eternity.