


FEAST OF ST BARTHOLOMEW – ST HELEN'S, ABINGDON

25 August 2024



Acts 5.12-16 / 1 Corinthians 4.9-15 / Luke 22.24-30

God has exhibited us apostles... as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world....

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

THE INTERIOR OF THE CATHEDRAL IN MILAN — the *Duomo* — does not make extensive use of the abundant sunlight with which God bathes northern Italy, nor does it waste any *lira* on its electrical lighting. The lighting scheme leans toward contrast between bright, clear highlights and dusky shadows; thus it displays to great effect the aspects of the interior that the church wants to make prominent, while leaving the less favoured side chapels and sculpture in a sort of midday twilight.

So it was, at least when I visited the Duomo years ago, sauntering through the aisles and gazing and praying and kneeling and taking discreet photographs of the memorable sights. I noticed one statue in particular, of a saint with an unusual robe wrapped around his waist and draped over his arm, holding a book half-open against his thigh. The most striking feature of this figure was the intricately detailed modelling of the saint's musculature, all the tendons and ligaments and even some veins clearly visible; he didn't just have a six-pack of abs, his whole torso taut with finely detailed rippling muscles... until I half-realised and half-remembered that this statue memorialised Saint Bartholomew, who — according to many accounts — was martyred by

having his skin stripped from him. And indeed, what I had first perceived as his robe, on second examination surely represented his skin, draped across his back and casually over his arm as if it were a shawl.

Now, Margaret will attest that I have a weak stomach for such sights, and I turned away quickly to settle my nerves and regain my composure. But the shocking power of that image has stayed with me, a nightmare, but at the same time a vivid sign (as I am sure that the sculptor intended) that the punishing torture that Bartholomew's captors inflicted upon him did not make him a pitiable victim, but signified for the defiant saint and for the church that remembers him the truth of St Paul's words this morning: We apostles have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to humans. We embody the Gospel *on display*. When we follow Christ in the way he set out for us, we make our the texture of our lives unintelligible to those among our neighbours who see only our foolishness. While many aim to cultivate social prominence, spotlit fame and the political power to *force others* to fulfil their will, the way of Christ, the way of Bartholomew reminds us that the narrow gate and the bruising way, lead to life. That may not be the popular, broad, well-paved High Street, but at the terminus of the Way of the Lord its pilgrims will inherit, as daughters and sons of the King, a glorious Realm of peace and rest.

One point especially pertinent to today's feast bears emphasising. We *must not* set *suffering*, mortification of the flesh, as our goal in itself, not even as a goal for drawing closer to God. Suffering is *strictly* a predictable side effect of our determination, yours and mine, to live differently (in the words Jen proclaimed to us last Sunday): 'It is the wisdom that the Church has that is to be valued, and embraced, even if those on the outside see it as foolishness'. Not all who suffer are

advancing toward spiritual depth, and not all who are advancing toward spiritual depth *suffer*. St Paul simply warns us that we ought to *expect* that people who think we're behaving foolishly, or counterculturally, or inexplicably, may treat us as if we are foolish, mad, or dangerous.

At the same time, Paul introduces his discussion of the apostles as a means of characterising the way that a life dedicated to Christ ought to look to outsiders. The way of Christ doesn't lead by way of *denying* our bodies, *hating* our bodies; our bodies are a *gift*, a very good thing, afforded us for bodily purposes. With our bodies, we cook; with our bodies we pray; with our bodies we *love* and *serve* and *care for* one another. With our bodies we *sing* and make music. With our bodies we paint, we roll, we touch one another. With our bodies we *continue* the work of Christ.

And in all these pursuits, our bodies take us to the verge of heaven, to the precipice overlooking the precincts of paradise. Jesus lived and worked and taught, *bodily*. Jesus died and was raised from death, *bodily*. St Paul received the Gospel and preached up and down the Egnatian Way, *bodily*, and he endured harassment, beatings, and ultimately death, *bodily*. Peter and John made known the power of Jesus's name in healing the immobile man, *bodily*. Bartholomew taught and Healed and was martyred, *bodily*. And Jesus rose again, *bodily*, as we all shall rise, *bodily*. And now as in that day, our prayers, our songs, our service, our paintings, our cakes, our poems, our *love* carry us *past the bounds of bodies*, to the hoped-for goal of *boundless* joy in God's grace.

So St Bartholomew stands in the shadows of Milan's Duomo, strong and proud, every muscle, sinew, vein and nerve and yes even his skin on display to the world that tortured him, *bodily* proclaiming that the world with which today we may be *misaligned* — this world will be reordered, reconciled to the Gospel. On that day, the multitude who

have stood with Jesus, stood with his troubled sisters, with his bed-bound brothers, who have persisted in the righteousness that comes from God in a world that trusts weapons and wile, all who have stood by Jesus in his trials: he confers on them, just as his Father has conferred on him, a kingdom, a kingdom without domination, without helplessness, a kingdom without subjection where the *enemies* of peace must find their way through the unfamiliarly gentle world of forgiveness and grace.

May we all come to that kingdom, poor and lonely, proud and humble, wealthy and wise. May we all stand up for Jesus as supporters, fellow workers, as his apostles, emissaries, as lightbearers in confusing, beclouded times. May we train our bodies for the joyous task of *amplifying* the glory of God in solidarity with Bartholomew, with Peter and Paul and Helen and saints throughout the ages, *bodily* proclaiming the hope of wholeness and holiness, the love for strangers and neighbours and friends and rivals, and the embodied faith in Jesus Christ —

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen