

FEAST OF ST BARTHOLOMEW – ST NICOLAS'S, ABINGDON

24 August 2025



Isaiah 43.8-13 / Acts 5.12-16 / Luke 22.24-30

You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen.

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

BARTHOLOMEW is one of those saints about whom we know *next to nothing*. Of course, if you can count on one thing about human beings, you can count on how much we hate knowing next to nothing about important topics, so Holy Mother Church, in her infinite wisdom and inventiveness, (*ahem*) *discovered* aspects of Bartholomew's identity and life to supply what was lacking in the historical, and even the scriptural, record. He went on preaching tours of India and Armenia; he was martyred by flaying; his body was miraculously transported from Armenia to Lipari, in Italy, in the sixth century; his feast is remembered for the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, started when French Catholics slaughtered Huguenots who were visiting Paris. And a relic of his arm was preserved in Canterbury Cathedral until the Reformation, since which time it has been lost. You know, the *usual*.

If you'll indulge me, though, I'd like to rest for a while with St Bartholomew's *unknown* history and identity. In him, we have a saint, an *apostle*, whose family we don't know, whose personal characteristics we don't know, whose capacity for miracles is lost to us. St John doesn't count him among the apostles (so people conclude that Bartholomew must really be *Nathanael*, whom John *does* name) which would make him

a *secret agent* apostle, living and working under an alias. Even his *arm* is lost.

Sometimes people suppose that we ought only to honour saints about whom we know a *lot*, saints whose biography and even *existence* can be verified to a high degree of historical confidence. That, I think, misses part of the point. *Of course*, we have no interest in a fantasy world of saints who never existed at all, a Saviour whom we only *imagine* to have walked among us, a church whose faith amounts only to a tissue of agreeable fabrications. But that's a false choice; much of what we *think* that we *know* about the past, we know only partially and subject to change. Mary Beard reminds us that the history of ancient Rome has changed a lot over the past fifty years. We appreciate the saints not for their being especially *real* — anyone can do that, even *I* — but we honour the saints for being *signs* to us of what holiness looks like on earth. If some saints' lives have been *enhanced* or even *invented* by pious storytellers who thought they were doing us a favour, we know that *other* saints have lived undeniably real lives. And we cherish the *fulness* of the communion of saints as a sort of anthology of holiness that probably includes some fiction, and surely includes some factuality, and *always* includes the sorts of heroic goodness that speaks persuasively to faithful hearts. Just as all the saints have had their faults as well as their virtues, and some were disagreeable despite being holy, and some were not so very holy but most appealing, so *all* the saints have varying degrees of 'realism' to their lives, and that's as it should be.

Now you may say I'm just making the best of a weak poker hand. But then, that assumes that we're playing poker in the first place. If we're playing Bridge, or not even competing in a card game at all, the allegation that we're holding a weak hand doesn't matter. Saint Bartholomew turns up this morning to remind us that we aren't competing with some other

faith, or lack thereof, on a church history version of University Challenge. We gather this morning, we read Scripture and pray and take the Body and Blood of Christ as part of our efforts to grow toward greater and greater conformity to the holiness Jesus embodied among us, the holiness that saints past and contemporary impress on our imaginations so that we too participate in their holiness. ‘Mark my footsteps, my good page; tread thou in them boldly’ as Good King Wenceslas I, Saint and Martyr, whose own barefoot piety is open to historical scepticism, instructed the servant who followed him. ‘You are my witnesses, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am [the Lord]’, as God commanded the Prophet Isaiah to tell his neighbours. ‘Be imitators of *me*, as I am of *Christ*’, as Saint Paul told his congregations. Fill your imaginations with *all that’s best* in what stories humans can tell, whether those stories be hard-headed journalistic documentary or vivid, soul-touching fiction, and then let your imagination of how saints might walk the pavements of today, as saints *we very certainly know of* did indeed walk the streets of Abingdon, walked even within this very church; let your saintly imagination guide you, beloved servants of God, to walk among our neighbours as signs of Christ’s humility, of Peter’s merciful compassion, of Isaiah’s unswerving fidelity to the One LORD and God whom he proclaimed to all the nations. Be a sign of Bartholomew’s saintly anonymity, doing the good work of an apostle *unseen* and *unknown*. And remember in your heart that — even if you lose your arm in Canterbury Cathedral — Jesus has plenty of good ways for you to bear witness to him.

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

Amen