

## Less Familiar Disciples 2: BARTHOLOMEW

Acts 1:12-14 [MW20-24]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 21 June 2020

What's in a name?

A woman went to a restaurant wearing a shirt with the designer's signature on the right sleeve. While waiting for a table, an elderly gentleman tapped her on the shoulder. Pointing to the label, he said, "Nice name." Then, in a curious tone, he asked, "What do you call your other arm?"

Two wellborn and blue-blooded dogs were walking daintily along the street with their noses held high in the air. Along came a big alley dog. Embarrassed at being in the company of such a no-account dog, one of the lady dogs said, "We must go. My name is Miji, spelled M-I-J-I." The other blueblood said, "My name is Miki, spelled M-I-K-I." The low-class alley dog put his nose up in the air also and said, "My name is Fido, spelled P-H-Y-D-E-A-U-X."

This past week I wondered why I had set myself this assignment about less-familiar disciples

- what else could I say?  
what else was there to say ...
- then I found myself wondering why these 'less familiar' disciples were there  
I mean, why bother to mention them at all?  
why list them in the 'cast of characters' if they have no part in the play?
- why not just record the 'big names' and say there were a handful of others also

The point remains that the named twelve, all twelve of them

- were hand-picked, chosen by Jesus  
faithfully recorded in the scriptures  
and have come all the way down to us for a reason
- so I said to myself, there must be something we can learn from Bartholomew  
something useful, helpful, challenging, encouraging for us  
as we respond to the call of Jesus in our lives today
- there must be!  
and there is ...

But first I have to convince you that Bartholomew is not Bartholomew

- but is in fact someone else!

Do you know those "Guess Who" games? [Powerpoint Slide 1]

- there are a whole lot of faces on a series of racks  
two people are each given a card with a face, that the other person tries to guess  
that face is somewhere on that rack of faces
- so they take turns guessing [Powerpoint Slide 2]  
do they have blue eyes? no? flick down all the faces with blue eyes  
do they have earrings? yes! flick down all the faces without earrings  
and so on until only one face is left, and that must be the person

When you do this kind of questioning with Bartholomew, you end up with ...

- Nathanael!  
Nathanael? Yes, Nathanael

Nathanael is never mentioned in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke

- while Bartholomew is never mentioned in John's gospel
- Bartholomew's name is coupled with Philip's in the lists of Matthew and Luke and found next to it in Mark
- which agrees with John's gospel where Nathanael is a friend of Philip
- "bar-tholomew" is a patronymic meaning "son of Tolmai"
- so it is likely that his name was Nathanael bar Tolmai
- "Nathanael" as his first name, and "Bartholomew" as his surname

And you say to me: 'so what!'

- Bartholomew is Nathanael, big deal!?
- well actually it is

Listen to this from John's gospel, chapter 1 vv 43-51

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. There he met Philip, who was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter. Jesus said to Philip, "Come with me." Philip then found Nathanael and said, "We have found the one that Moses and the Prophets wrote about. He is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael asked, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip answered, "Come and see."*

*When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said, "Here is a true descendant of our ancestor Israel. And he isn't deceitful." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.*

*Jesus answered, "Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree." Nathanael said, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God and the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Did you believe me just because I said that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see something even greater. I tell you for certain that you will see heaven open and God's angels going up and coming down on the Son of Man."*

Philip invited Nathanael to come and see Jesus

- and Nathanael responded
- in this brief record from John's gospel we have a real, human encounter
- full of life, wit and repartee

Philip says to his mate Nathanael

- we've met him, the Saviour, it's fantastic
- and while he's all bubbling over with enthusiasm
- Nathanael says
- the Saviour you reckon, and you said he comes from where?
- Nazareth? Yeah right!
- Philip doesn't bother to argue, he just throws up his hands and says
- yeah, well, don't take my word for it, come and see for yourself
- and Philip takes Nathanael to see Jesus

You can imagine the conversation along the way

- Nathanael saying how Philip is too trusting
- always getting taken in by these guys who claim to be something they're not
- but don't you worry mate, I'll sort it out

Then when they get there, after one line from Jesus

- Nathanael is convinced Jesus is the Son of God
- I'll sort it out ... yeah right!

Once someone has a real encounter with Jesus, Son of God

- life is never the same

Nathanael became one of Jesus' hand picked disciples  
though we hear nothing of him by name again  
until after Jesus' death and resurrection

This from John chapter 21

*Jesus later appeared to his disciples along the shore of Lake Tiberias. Simon Peter, Thomas the Twin, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, and the brothers James and John, were there, together with two other disciples.*

There are however some historical records and traditions

- this is from William McBirnie in his book, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*

There is a very interesting personal description of Bartholomew which says that He had black curly hair, white skin, large eyes, a straight nose, hair that covered his ears and a long grizzled middle height beard. Bartholomew is said to have worn a white robe with a purple stripe and a white cloak with four purple gems at the corners. For twenty-six years he wore these and it is said that they never grew old. In fact, It was also reported, that his shoes lasted the same as his clothing.

Of Bartholomew, it is said that he prayed a hundred times a day and a hundred times a night. It is also said that his voice was like a trumpet, angels waited upon him and that he was always cheerful and knew all languages. In the company of the apostle Philip, the apostle Bartholomew went to Asia Minor and laboured in Hierapolis, near Laodicea and Colossae, in what is modern day Turkey.

While in Hierapolis, it is said that the wife of the Roman proconsul was healed by the apostles Philip and Bartholomew, that she became a Christian and that her husband ordered Philip and Bartholomew to be put to death by crucifixion. Sadly, Philip was crucified, but Bartholomew escaped martyrdom, when for some special reason, the magistrates caused him to be taken down from the cross and dismissed. From there, Bartholomew went eastward to India and then to greater Armenia.

A popular tradition among the Armenians is that the apostle Jude (Thaddaeus) was the first to evangelise their region throughout the years of 43 to 66 AD and that the apostle Bartholomew joined him in 60 AD (eight years before Bartholomew was martyred). It is also said that Bartholomew carried with him a copy of the apostle Matthew's Gospel. This copy was reported to be found at a later time and a converted stoic philosopher by the name of Pantaenus is said to have brought it to Alexandria.

The majority tradition, with varying details, is that Bartholomew was killed by order of Astyages for having converted his brother Polymius, King of Armenia. The manner of his death was being flayed alive then crucified head downwards in Albanopolis, now Derbend on the Caspian Sea. His emblem in art is a flaying knife. The flayed Bartholomew can be seen in Michelangelo's Sistine painting of the Last Judgement, holding his own skin. For this reason he is regarded as the Patron Saint of tanners. His relics are thought by some to be preserved in the church of St Bartholomew-on-the-Island at Rome. His feast is celebrated on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August.

That's the official 'dry and dusty' historical record

- and as I reflected on the encounter between Philip, Nathanael and Jesus

I came up with seven things that might help us, inspire us, encourage us today:

1. Philip asked Nathanael to come and see, and he did.
2. Nathanael had a sense of humour – ‘can anything good come out of Nazareth!’
3. Nathanael didn’t take things at face value – he didn’t just blindly or blithely accept.
4. He investigated - he checked things out for himself.  
He was interested, curious and found out.
5. When he found that ‘good thing’, he grabbed it with both hands. It was life-changing.
6. He was genuine, sincere. No pretence, no airs and graces, no act.  
As Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said, “Here is truly an Israelite. There is nothing false in him.”
7. He was given the promise of greater things, that he would be able to see and be part of through following Jesus:  
Jesus said to Nathanael, “Do you believe simply because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than that. I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and ‘angels of God going up and coming down’ on the Son of Man.”

Then I was thinking, okay, Nathanael is Bartholomew

- and there are some things we can take from that but why Bartholomew?
- why is Bartholomew mentioned in Mark, Matthew and Acts?
- and I got to thinking about ‘placeholders’  
placeholders are used when setting up documents for printing  
they are not a picture or text, but mark the space where a particular picture or a particular block of text may be inserted
- they ‘hold the space’

It seems to me that Bartholomew is a ‘placeholder’ for us

- like this picture perhaps  
I’m a Star Trek fan, and our daughter Amy gave me this picture for my birthday  
a picture of the original Star Trek cast on the bridge
- this picture is special because it includes me! [Powerpoint Slide 3]  
there was a space in the picture and Amy ‘put me in’
- me, Wayne Thornton, who’s watched Star Trek since he was eight years old  
who’s always been fascinated by the thought of space travel and starships  
there he is on the bridge of the starship Enterprise
- who’d’ve thought ...

Bartholomew does that for us

- for you, a follower of Jesus  
called by name, hand-picked by Jesus
- Bartholomew holds your place  
so you too number among the disciples  
the close circle of those Jesus taught, loved, cried and laughed with
- who’d’ve thought ...

When all the other faces on the “Guess Who” racks are flicked down [Powerpoint Slide 4]

- your face is the one!  
who’d’ve thought.
- Wow!