

Today is the feast of the Apostle and Saint Bartholomew. I am reminded of the preacher at Christ Church Oxford, who being asked to give the annual sermon on St Frideswide got into the pulpit and said:

‘Of St Frideswide not much is known, doubtless she was good,’ and sat down again.

Not much is known about St Bartholomew. He is listed among the twelve, and usually paired with Philip. Interestingly he is not mentioned at all in St John’s gospel, but tradition has it that he is one and the same as Nathaniel, whom Jesus described saying ‘ here is an Israelite without deceit.’ Of his later life we know nothing for certain, although there are traditions. The historian Eusebius states that he travelled to India and preached the gospel there. Other sources claim that he went to Armenia and was martyred somewhere by the Caspian Sea, possibly by beheading or by being skinned alive – either way a terrible end.

The fact that we know so little about him or indeed most of the apostles is interesting in itself, for in conjunction with the stories that are told in Acts, it tells us about the way in which they conducted their lives.

Imagine you have such a reputation as a healer that people put themselves where your shadow might fall upon them.

Peter and the apostles were in this position. They were respected, held in awe for their bravery, thought a bit stupid for putting themselves at risk, but most of all, they were mobbed because people wanted something from them. They wanted healing. Crowds followed them, jostling for the best position, getting as close as possible, then melting away if the authorities looked like causing trouble. These were not supporters, not yet Christians, but Peter and the others talked to them , gave them the gospel message, and some, just a few to begin with, would realise that this was not about getting something for themselves, but about a way of living that made one more fully alive than they had imagined possible.

The presence of these crowds must have brought with it terrible temptations. This healing was a gift that the apostles could have used for money, or as a route to social status, or for power. They could have utilised the skills of grateful followers to smooth their transition from underclass to people of influence. We see it over and over again, people who start off with high ideals but who sell out because they cannot cope with the temptation or who are exploited by others who do not share their high standards. These are the obvious temptations, but there would be other, more subtle ones too. The inevitable comparisons and jealousies: why is he considered better at healing than me? The hurt when one is passed over in favour of someone else or when criticised for getting something wrong. The temptation to consider oneself indispensable, to feel that one has to go on even when exhausted because no-one else is quite as good or quite as dedicated. Many and various temptations. The same ones that inflict most of us but which are magnified when people will do anything to be in your presence.

Yet the apostles remained true to their calling, they remained followers of Christ not just in name, but in deed.

Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, expresses clearly what this means in practice. The apostles are fools for the sake of Christ – they are risking imprisonments every day. They are weak – they have

not even tried to get any kind of political power and have distanced themselves from the nationalists who have turned to violence to obtain freedom. They are held in disrepute – by the religious authorities because they sit lightly to the law, by the Romans, because they are seen to be troublemakers, by the rich, because they make no attempt to better themselves, and by the poor, for the same reason. They are hungry and thirsty, they are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and they grow weary from the work of their own hands. When reviled, they bless; when persecuted, they endure; when slandered, they speak kindly. They have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things. Paul ends this paragraph with the words ‘to this very day’. We might take that literally. How often do we hear that you can only defeat evil with weapons – it is the only language they understand? This is not the way the apostles lived.

If any one of the apostles had risen to a position of power, the course of Christianity might have been different. When we look at later history we see how Christianity and power have at times gone hand in hand and led to the rise of Christendom. We could debate for hours over whether this was a good or a bad thing, but what is certain is that it was very different from what the apostles were doing. They remained largely unknown and, in the political and social realm, unimportant, because they resisted all temptations to be otherwise.

Paul contrasts his life and the life of the apostles with the lot of the Corinthians who use their Christianity like a club. The Corinthian Christians are strong, they are held in honour, they enjoy status, fine dining, and are proud of their lot.

This is uncomfortable reading because when we think about it, most of us are rather more like the Corinthians than we are like the apostles.

Not for nothing did Jesus say that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And whether we are earning several hundred thousand a year or living off a state pension, we are rich in comparison to the Christians fleeing Northern Iraq or Syria.

The gospels force us back again and again into this difficult territory where we are confronted by our own inadequacies - the gulf between the high ideals of Christian behaviour and the way in which we actually live. If we are to narrow that gap, we need first of all to acknowledge the gifts we have. We will all be different. Some of us can be very persuasive, skilled at teaching and arguing. Others will be good with people, naturally enjoying the company of others. Some will have wealth. Some will be in positions of influence. All of us have some gifts. What temptations are associated with those gifts? How do we use them? For ourselves or for others? Are we looking for a perpetual memorial, to be remembered, or are we content simply to have done our best and be forgotten?

Bartholomew, as far we can tell, was a true follower of Christ. He spoke the truth, he used the gifts he received for the benefit of others, he was brave enough to risk his own life, and he did not care about his own reputation. The only legacy he wanted to leave was a trail of new followers, of others who would follow the teaching of Christ. For he knew what Christ had taught him, that the only way in which the wrongs and evils of this world can be defeated is by love.

Help us Lord to use our gifts in the service and manner of Christ. Amen.