

St. Bartholomew Day (August 24th, 2025)

1 Cor. 4:9-15; Luke 22:24-30.

A dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded the greatest.

Who was it? Not, it seems, Bartholomew. He's one of the apostles about whom we hear virtually nothing in the New Testament. Later stories say a little more, but are of dubious reliability. Perhaps he went to India, and Ethiopia and maybe Iraq to bring the Gospel there. Some say he met his death in Azerbaijan, by having his skin flayed off before being crucified. There's a particularly gruesome Michelangelo picture of St. Bartholomew in Heaven, holding his flayed skin in his hands. It was certainly believed that his relics ended up in a church in Rome built on the site of an ancient hospital, which is how Bartholomew gained his special association with hospitals – as in St. Bart's, London. His arm, it was claimed, ended up in Canterbury Cathedral, where he has a place of honour in the stained glass and where the Diocese is full of churches dedicated to his memory.

But what do we *really* know about Bartholomew? Not much. Which the Gospel this morning suggests is pretty much the point. Being a disciple, even being the greatest disciple, is not about being someone everyone admires and remembers. Being the greatest disciple is about being anonymous, humble, at the service of others. 'The Kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you', Jesus says, 'Not so with you. The greatest among you must become like the least, the leader like the one who serves.'

Wouldn't it be just astonishing if *that* was what people knew about Christians? If when you asked people, what you associate with the Church, they *wouldn't* say: ah yes, those people with funny ideas about sex, or whose leaders are a bit creepy, or who are always banging on about money, and are always against whatever the latest change in society is. Wouldn't it be great if instead they said, oh yes, Christians ... those people who genuinely seem to care and serve and love just for its own sake, who just seem really humble. Wouldn't that be amazing?

And it's a good way to think, actually, about what it is *you're* doing here and why you're here. I remember a parishioner once said to me, explaining why I only saw them in church on a very occasional basis, 'well, I come when I feel the need.' Now there were lots of things that wound me up about that comment, but here's one of the biggest: church isn't primarily about your needs. Church isn't primarily about your needs. Why not try thinking of it this way. You come to church first to serve God, to do what He told you and to worship. You come second to serve the other people, to meet *their* needs. In the most simple of ways, whether that's directing the camera, or making the coffee, or smiling at someone, talking with them, listening to them, making them loved. Church isn't about *you* – or at any rate, not firstly about you. It's about God, and then it's about us, and then you come in some distance behind.

This is, unsurprisingly, rather hard to pull off. The New Testament is full of examples of it not working out like that -of church being just another place where individual egotism runs amok. Even when Jesus was actually there, Luke says, 'a dispute arose among them about which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.' And then in our first reading, from 1 Corinthians, we're listening to St. Paul engaged in a power struggle with other leaders in the church at Corinth. These were very impressive people, 'super-apostles' as Paul bitterly calls them somewhere: charismatic, clever, sophisticated, good with words, the kind of people who end up leading every kind of group. And Paul's tactic in this fight is to contrast himself with them: he says, look, it's my weakness, my suffering, my not very super looking kind of ministry, which makes me the real deal. I'm the real apostle. I'm the greatest.

He doesn't say the last bit, of course, he doesn't actually say 'I'm the greatest' – but the tone is definitely there. In fact, in various places in his letters, Paul is very touchy indeed on the subject of his authority. For all that he understood so clearly what the Cross was all about, for all that he sees, as he says in the letter to the Philippians, that it was God emptying Himself out for others, that it was the utter absence of ego, he also clearly still really struggled with ego himself. If that sounds like a criticism of Paul, it is – but of course, that only goes to show how egotism remains a challenge for *all of us*. Paul was a much, much better Christian than me, and yet still, he hadn't quite shaken this. Still, the issues of power, ego, competition, had him to a certain extent wrapped in their tentacles, like some great sucking octopus.

And we can see that all around us – in society, in family, in church. Even people who speak the language of service, the language of humility. Even people who actually do the deeds of humility, the deeds of service... they can sometimes do them in precisely the opposite spirit. Like clergy, for instance. I can't tell you how many times I've worked harder not because I love people, but to feel better about myself, and frankly to show off. Being the servant can often be, funnily enough, about making yourself important, giving yourself moral kudos, its own kind of power. I'm the essential one, I'm the humble one, I'm the one who serves the community, I'm the one the community needs. In a 'don't-really-need-to-say-it-out-loud' kind of way, I'm the greatest. Good, loving, serving people, clergy and laity, everywhere you look ... still caught up in all this stuff. It's as if there's no way out of the octopus' grip.

But there is. Admittedly, this side of the resurrection, we'll never be perfect. We'll never be just love, without any trace of the old ways of being. But we *can begin* to be free. We can begin to be less and less driven by ego. How? Well, here's a few suggestions.

Number one. Come back to this Gospel story over and over again. Learn it off by heart. Literally, off by heart, why not? Let it sink deep into you. That way, it will get into your roots, and begin to change you from the bottom up.

Number two, remember you're a sinner. You probably don't even know how mixed up your motivations for everything you do are, how complicated you are. So, everytime you begin to think, ah I'm really something quite impressive, remember what Christianity says about us. That we're loved, yes, of course, but that we're loved precisely as unimpressive, prone to disaster, quite deeply screwed up people. Think of yourself like that, and it's quite a good remedy for pride.

Number three, never refuse help, never insist that you're the one who has to do everything. You're not the hero of any story. Remember that good living is about us, not you.

And lastly, **number four**: supremely, come here, to communion, week after week, because what happens here is that what you need, and what you can't do for yourself, is put inside you, put at the very roots of your being. This simple life of love, of service, of leaving ego behind, the life of Christ. I'm among you as one who serves, says Jesus in the Gospel: He's among us here, in bread and wine, to be in us as one who serves. In us, to make us like himself. This is the way to freedom.

For which we give thanks to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.