

A Sermon for the Feast of St. Bartholomew, August 24, 2008

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In the Western Church August 24th is set aside for the remembrance of St. Bartholomew the Apostle, one of the twelve Disciples of Jesus. While no record of his life and ministry is recorded in the Scriptures, church tradition informs us that after leaving Jerusalem he journeyed as a missionary to India taking with him a copy of the Gospel written by Matthew. From India he is believed to have traveled to Armenia where he was eventually flayed alive and crucified upside down. He is remembered to this day as the patron saint of the Armenian Church.

While little more can be said with certitude about the life of St. Bartholomew, much can be said about the work to which his life was dedicated. It is fitting for our purposes to begin with an examination of today's collect. In it the church recalls the grace given to the Apostle Bartholomew "truly to believe and to preach thy word," beseeching God that the same gift may be granted unto us, the portion of Christ's church alive today; that we ourselves might embrace the gospel and undertake to preach it to a still unbelieving world.

Today's epistle lesson provides evidence of the impact that a faithful church community has on its surrounding society. The early church as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles had in every way become a spectacle, first in Jerusalem and eventually throughout the entire Roman world. "By the hands of the Apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people." Miracles became so common that people "brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them." The emergent faith of these men was not disappointed for "they were healed every one." A clear pattern was established early in the life of God's church: where the Gospel is preached a broken humanity is made whole.

The emphasis of St. Bartholomew's day is unequivocally evangelism. Interestingly, this is a word that engenders some anxiety in the life of the traditional church. While most of us have come to enjoy, if not depend upon, the liturgy of the Anglican Church we often find ourselves at a loss of how to share our traditional practice of the Christian faith with those around us. It seems a bit more difficult for us at St. Matthew's to invite an unchurched individual simply to worship with us on Sunday. The early Church recognized this challenge and routinely dismissed visitors and catechumens for additional teaching following the Liturgy of the Word. Our weekly Inquirer's Classes at St. Matthew's accomplishes this same purpose on a fairly regular basis. The Liturgy of the Eucharist was never envisioned as an entry level service of the Church. The Scriptures teach us that believers traditionally gathered on the first day of the week to partake as a community in a mysterious meal in which they both feasted with God and feasted on God. For some reason that type of worship proves to be a difficult sell to the average American. I know that it certainly was for me. Several of us have a running joke that far from being "seeker sensitive" the services at St. Matthews could even be considered "seeker hostile." So what form is it that evangelism should take for us in the liturgical church?

It is unhelpful for us merely to construct a straw man argument articulating the various things we find distasteful with the evangelistic practices common to many protestant churches only to dismiss them as not in keeping with the tone of our particular tradition. This is

counterproductive and our efforts should instead be centered on how it is that we at St. Matthew's ought to be carrying out the work of spreading the gospel to our immediate community and the world in our current day and age. The truth of the matter is that there are hundreds of ways. There are in fact as many ways to preach the gospel as there are people by whom it must be preached; or better yet, as many ways as there are people to whom it must be preached. We often recoil from the standard methods of evangelism because we find them painfully impersonal. Canned or rote presentations of the Christian gospel run the dual risk of neglecting the particular gifts which the individual Christian brings to evangelism as well as ignoring the unique circumstances of the person to whom the gospel is being preached. The crux of the matter then is how we as a church are to employ each believer's peculiar gifts to meet the manifold needs of the individuals with whom we are surrounded in our daily lives.

This ultimately proves so simple that it is somewhat laughable. In the end, despite our best efforts as a human race, the life of faith is quite simple. Live your life well and gratefully worship the God by whom it was given to you; or do your work and build your altar. This is in fact the truest form of evangelism. As St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel to all nations, and if necessary use words." In our best moments our lives are the embodiment of the gospel. We stand as living testaments to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit unleashed within the human soul.

Please do not underestimate the power of the witness that this manner of living offers to an unbelieving world when it is coupled with quiet confidence. People are watching; individuals in our culture stare incessantly at the lives of those around them. They cannot help but wonder and compare: let them look. Befriend them. Enter into their lives. Allow them into yours. Selflessly meet their needs. Prepare yourself to answer the questions that will inevitably arise. Soon enough this will guide those willing among them to the altar of God. All true human inquiry inevitably leads to the foot of His throne. This expression of love is how the early Church first spread the Gospel throughout the known world. And the role of the church in each generation remains the same: we are "to enter fully into the turmoil and agony of the times and there to speak a word of hope."

Simple though it may seem, a church full of believers conducting their lives in this manner will become every bit as much spectacle in our day and age as was the early church in the book of Acts. The miracles wrought by the Apostles were an outward sign of the restoration offered to mankind by the preaching of the gospel. Our race stands still desperately in need of that grace and God has entrusted those of us alive in the church today with its infusion into our culture. There are literally thousands of ways to show forth this love to the world around us just as there are hundreds of thousands of needs crying out desperately to be met. This is our lifelong task as members of Christ's body. There is nothing else in our lives as worthy of our fullest devotion.

*"Grant O Lord, we beseech thee, unto thy Church,
to love that Word which Bartholomew believed,
and both to preach and receive the same;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*