

# Bartholomew – Apostle and Martyr

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Bartholomew – Apostle and Martyr -John 1 45-51

The name Bartholomew only occurs four times in the Bible, and then only in lists of the twelve apostles near Philip's name. Bartholomew means son of Talmi. He would also have had a given name; possibly Nathanael. <sup>(Gift of God)</sup> People think so because of today's gospel story. Because of Philip's role in it, tradition has long identified Bartholomew with Nathanael. Tradition also tells us that Bartholomew spread the gospel to Azerbaijan and Armenia, where he is patron saint.

So today, Philip tells his friend Nathanael – possibly also called Bartholomew – that in Jesus of Nazareth, he believes he's found the one Moses and the prophets said would come. But his friend is puzzled, *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* It's a fair question. Wasn't the promised one to come from Bethlehem? Nazareth was no more than four hundred people when Jesus was growing up, many of them builders and artisans at the nearby, new Roman city of Sepphoris.

Expectations in this story seem to be turned on their head. Who'd believe that the one promised by Moses and the prophets might come from a village that's little more than a construction camp. And who'd expect the one who asks *Can anything good come out of Nazareth* suddenly to become the Nathanael who confesses Jesus as 'Son of God and the King of Israel'. Yet he does. It's a puzzle. With two short, apparently unremarkable sentences, Jesus brings about a total change in Nathanael. Let's hear how it's described in the old, Authorised translation. There's a reason. *'Dost thou believe because I told thee that I saw thee under the fig tree? Thou*

*shalt see greater things than these. Very truly, I tell you, you (pl) will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'*

*Thee* and *thou* translate the Greek singular and *you* translates the plural. So in the third sentence about angels ascending and descending, Jesus changes from talking just to Nathanael, to speaking to everyone there; and to *us* too. John's gospel is saying the story of Nathanael's journey from doubt to belief is a call to us to do the same. Through his change of heart, Nathanael's story brings a message from God to us, and to everyone who hears his story. Think of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Let's look more closely at his transformation. Nathanael is someone who's vitally interested in the one that Moses and the prophets wrote about. We see how important it is to him because in spite of his doubt, he goes with Philip to see this Jesus – who can't possibly be the one! But what if ... ?

As Nathanael approaches, Jesus greets him with the cryptic words, *Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!* It's the only place in the gospels where anyone is called an Israelite. Calling Nathanael an Israelite connects him with the patriarch Jacob, who was later called Israel. <sup>Gen 32.28</sup>

Jesus' words about angels descending and ascending underline this connection between Nathanael and Jacob/Israel. Remember, Jacob had a dream about a ladder between heaven and earth, angels of God ascending and descending on it. <sup>Gen 28</sup> When he woke up, *Jacob said surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.*

Nathanael, like Jacob, the first Israelite, was also someone who struggled to know God's presence. But unlike that first Israelite, who tricked his brother out of his birthright, <sup>Gen 25</sup> *Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.* It was like a thunderbolt! With these words Jesus named Nathanael's

struggle to know God; to see the connection between heaven and earth. How could Jesus have known that about him? *Where did you get to know me?* means how do you know my struggle to know God's presence, to fathom the teaching of Moses in the law and the prophets?

Jesus' response is once again cryptic: *I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.* Many old writings from the rabbis speak of someone 'under a fig tree' as one who wrestles with the scriptures, <sup>Str-B II, 371</sup> So Jesus is saying *I saw you as you studied the scripture.* Jesus knows Nathanael immerses himself in the scriptures, seeks to understand them, and looks for the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote. Jesus has seen this man searching the scriptures, and recognised his deepest struggle; his quest. Jesus names the whole struggle in two short sentences, and Nathanael is overwhelmed. *Rabbi, teacher, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!* You're a teacher, and more than a teacher – you're the one set apart by God! Nathanael has made a great leap in his perception. Now Jesus challenges us to do so too. And it feels really personal!

*Very truly I tell you, you will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.* I'm not just a son of God or a King of Israel like the Davidic kings were. You have to expand your categories. I know your struggle to understand the connection between heaven and earth. Hear me telling you, says Jesus, that **I am that connection. I am that ladder** which enables heavenly truths and earthly truths to meet. It's me the angels ascend and descend by says Jesus. ... And today we hear him he say it to us; to you and me.

Jesus promises us that we *will* see greater things. Our categories will have to expand as **we** struggle with the scriptures and with our life experience. *We will see God at work.* Unlike the first Israel who named the place where he

received his revelation 'the house of God' (Bethel), and the 'gate of heaven', in today's story, Jesus is revealed to Nathanael and to you and me as God's house ***in person. He is the gate of heaven.*** And like Nathanael, like Bartholomew if that *was* him, we become apostles to others when we introduce them to this Jesus who knows them like he knows us. We each have a message from God for people who need to hear it. Can anything good come out of this parish? It sure can! Amen