

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles of our Lord. Our Gospel reading comes from John 1:43–51, but you might have noticed something strange about it: the name “Bartholomew” never appears in this text. Instead, John introduces us to a man named Nathanael.

Why is that? Well because St. Bartholomew and Nathanael are the same person. The name “Bartholomew” is a family name. It means “son of Tolmai.” Nathanael is a personal name. It means “gift of God.” The other Gospels list this apostle as Bartholomew, but John calls him Nathanael. If he were alive today, we'd probably just call him “Nathanael Bartholomew.”

And this situation isn't unusual in the Bible. In fact, many figures of the New Testament go by more than one name. Matthew was also called Levi. Simon was also called Peter, and sometimes Cephas. Jude was also called Thaddeus. Thomas was also called Didimus. Saul was also called Paul. It happens time and time again. So whatever we call him, “Nathanael” or “Bartholomew” or “Nathanael Bartholomew,” today is the day that we honor this apostle of Jesus Christ.

And the Church has long remembered St. Bartholomew with both reverence and awe. Tradition tells us he traveled far with the Gospel, going as far as India and Armenia. But wherever he went, he bore faithful witness to Christ, even to the point of death. And his death was not gentle. Ancient records tell us he was flayed alive.

Which is why our bulletin cover has two symbols on it. An Armenian cross, where he is the patron saint of the national church. And a set of three filet knives. The symbol of his suffering, but also of his faithfulness. And, most importantly, of Christ's power made perfect in weakness.

So, with those details out of the way, let's turn to this Gospel reading, where we are introduced to the apostle for the first time. Philip had just been called by Jesus, and now he runs to find his friend Nathanael. He tells him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” But Nathanael scoffs: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he asks.

We might be tempted to criticize him for this quick rejection. But let's be honest: we think the same way. It's easy to judge a book by its cover. It's easy to overlook things that appear weak. We look for God in things that are great and powerful, successful and impressive. Nathanael just could not imagine that the Messiah would come from a podunk little town like Nazareth. It was just too ordinary.

But God likes ordinary things. He uses them often. And we're often challenged when he does. Nathanael asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” But we might just as easily ask, “Can forgiveness come out of simply water? Can the Body and Blood of Christ come out of bread and wine? Can a word of absolution come out of a sinful pastor's mouth? Can anything good come out of these ordinary means?”

But Philip has the right answer: “Come and see.” Come and see Jesus. Come and see God made flesh. Come and see what Jesus will do. Come and see him die and rise again for you.

So Nathanael comes, and Jesus greets him: “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael is puzzled: “How do you know me?” And Jesus answers, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

At once Nathanael believes. “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Why does he make such a quick confession? Well, because in those words Jesus had revealed that He truly knew Nathanael. He saw not only his body under the fig tree, but his heart. He knew Nathanael's doubt. But He also knew that Nathanael, like Philip, was looking for the Messiah, the one who Moses and the prophets wrote. Jesus knew him through and through.

Jesus knew Nathanael just as Jesus knows you. He knows your name. He knows your heart. He knows the sins you hide, the shame you carry, the doubts you dare not speak aloud. He knows your fears. He knows your weaknesses. He knows your end.

He has seen you under the fig tree. He has seen you in your home, in your car, in your work, in your greatest achievements, and in your worst failures. He has seen you and he says to you, "Follow me."

But then Jesus says something interesting. Because while Nathanael may be convinced that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah, he doesn't really know what that word means. If Nathanael can be convinced by a simple act of prophecy that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel, he has set his bar far too low. Jesus has much more to show him.

"Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these. You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

If you didn't pick up on it, Jesus is pointing back to Jacob's dream in Genesis 28. Jacob was fleeing from his brother Esau when he lay down to sleep in the wilderness. He dreamed of a ladder set up on the earth, reaching up into heaven, and angels ascending and descending on it. When Jacob awoke, he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

But now Jesus reveals: That ladder was pointing to Me. I am the true ladder. I am the gate of heaven. I am the house of God. I am the place where heaven meets earth.

Not by our climbing up, but by His coming down. Not by our works, but by His cross. At Calvary the heavens were opened. At Calvary the gate of paradise was unlocked. At Calvary the angels ascended and descended on the Son of Man lifted up on the tree. The cross is Jacob's ladder, stretched from earth to heaven, with Christ Himself as the bridge. Our one and only mediator between God and man.

And that is what Nathanael Bartholomew would one day see. He followed Jesus, saw His miracles, heard His teaching, and witnessed His death and resurrection. He saw the ladder between earth and heaven. And what he saw sustained him even to the day of his own terrible death. For though his flesh was stripped away, his eyes still saw heaven opened in Christ Jesus.

We still see heaven opened in Christ Jesus. Every time the Word of Christ is preached, heaven is opened. Every time a sinner is baptized, heaven is opened. Every time the absolution is spoken, heaven is opened. Every time we kneel at the altar and receive the Body and Blood of Christ, heaven is opened. The ladder stretches down, not to the place where Jacob lay his head, but here, to this place. Angels ascend and descend, not in a dream, but in the Word of God you hear this day. The Son of Man is present, giving Himself to us.

But, as Bartholomew found out, the Gospel comes with a cost. The Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword, cutting to the division of soul and spirit. It cuts away our pride, our selfishness, and our idolatry. It exposes the sin we would rather keep hidden. It tells us the truth we would rather not hear: that nothing good can come from us. That left to ourselves, we are lost.

And yet the same knife also points us back to Christ. For He Himself was pierced for us. He bore the wrath of God. He endured the stripes, the thorns, the nails, the spear. He suffered the weight of our sin, that heaven might be opened to you.

So let the symbol of Bartholomew on this bulletin be not only a reminder of his death, but of Christ's death for you. And let it remind you that no suffering, no shame, no persecution, no weakness—not even death itself—can shut the door that Christ has opened.

For Jesus knows your name. He calls you to come and see. He opens heaven for you in His cross. He feeds you with His life at His table. And He promises you greater things still: that on the Last Day your eyes will see heaven fully opened, the angels ascending and descending, and the Son of Man coming in glory.

Until that day, we live as Bartholomew did: known by Christ, sustained by Christ, bearing witness to Christ. And even if the world despises us, even if the world mocks our faith, even if we must suffer death, we know this: Christ has opened heaven to you. Amen.