

St Bartholomew-26 August 2018

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6: 10-20; John: 6:56-69

May I speak in the name of the living God, who is Father,
Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Friday was the feast of St Bartholomew, one of the twelve disciples, whose name is linked with Philip's in the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. In John's Gospel Bartholomew is not mentioned, but Nathanael is linked with Philip instead, leading scholars to suggest that he is one and the same person. Whoever he is, Bartholomew shows great faith when he meets Jesus. His first and only recorded words in the New Testament to Jesus are: 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!'

According to popular tradition, Bartholomew was martyred by being flayed alive and beheaded, and he is usually depicted with a knife, and is the patron saint of tanners. The many miracles claimed to have been the work of St Bartholomew are often linked with the weight of objects. For example, the people of the small island of Lipari, off the coast of Sicily, celebrated his feast day each year with a procession, taking his solid **gold and silver** statue from the Cathedral of St Bartholomew through the streets of the city, and one year it suddenly became very heavy and had to be set down. When the men carrying the statue lifted it again, they soon found they had to set it down for a second and then a third time because of its great weight, delaying the procession well beyond its usual duration. And while they delayed, the walls further down the hill collapsed. Had they carried the statue more quickly, the procession would have been passing those

walls and would have been buried in the rubble, with many killed and injured. The miracle that saved them was attributed to St Bartholomew.

You may have noticed, as you came into the church this morning, the gold and silver flower arrangements in the niches on either side of the doorway. In keeping with our flower festival theme of Music in Bloom, they are intended to celebrate the Gold and Silver waltz of Franz Lehar, composer of *The Merry Widow*, but by a happy serendipity they also link nicely to the gold and silver statue of St Bartholomew's miracle!

And surrounded by all these wonderful flower arrangements, celebrating music in this marvellous flower festival, how could I ignore the obvious subject? After all, gardens are at the heart of the Christian faith. The story

of creation begins with God creating the Garden of Eden as the home of the first humans, Adam and Eve, and all the other living creatures. And we reach the climax of all we believe at the Resurrection, where the risen Christ reveals himself to Mary Magdalene in the Garden where his body has been buried three days before.

Indeed, there are four gardens in the Bible that take us through the story. That first, the Garden of Eden, is created by God to enable a relationship with Adam and Eve, and to offer provision, protection and freedom. In the centre of the garden is the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and it is through Adam and Eve eating the fruit of this latter tree that death enters the world.

The second garden is the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus walks with his disciples and spends time with his Father. If you visit the Holy Land you can visit the supposed site of that garden, full of ancient olive trees, so old that they or the trees from which they sprang may well have witnessed Christ's agony as he struggled with temptation, but was obedient and surrendered to his Father's will that he must die to save the world. And so he was betrayed by one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, and arrested by the Roman soldiers and the Jewish officials, who were determined to do away with this upstart preacher from the provinces.

And the third garden is beside Golgotha. It needed to be near the place of Jesus's death, because the Sabbath was about to begin and Jesus needed to be buried quickly. This is not only the place of Jesus's burial, the scene of

the most momentous event in history, when Christ was raised from the dead, and ended the tyranny of death by giving us the gift of eternal life as he had promised. Not only does that universal, life-giving event take place in a garden, but Mary Magdalene mistakes Christ for the gardener. I have mentioned before Rembrandt's painting of this scene, with Christ wearing a large floppy sun hat and carrying a towel. Our world is a garden and Jesus is the gardener who cares for us, knows our wants and needs, and ensures that we grow and prosper come rain or shine.

The fourth and final garden is not a garden we can visit, but is in the Glory of God, in the Book of Revelation of St John (Chapter 22), at the very end of the story. The angel shows John 'the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through

the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.'

Gardens are indeed for the healing of the nations; they restore us and give us peace; they show us the beauty of God's creation all around us. And a small part of that beauty is here within us in church today. May we thank God for that beauty, for the skills of our flower arrangers, and for the joy that these displays will bring to our many visitors this weekend.

Amen