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26<sup>th</sup> August 2007  
13<sup>th</sup> Pentecost, St. Bartholomew  
Propers: Deuteronomy 18:15-18; Psalm 91:1-4; 1 Corinthians 4:9-15; Luke  
22:24-30

In my cover article of this month's Evangel, I wrote of moving some of our neglected feasts to Sundays this fall – and last week, for the Blessed Virgin, and this week, for St. Bartholomew are just a preview of what's in store. If you look at your calendar in the Evangel, you'll see that in September we will celebrate Labor Day, Holy Cross, St Matthew, and St Michael and All Angels – along with the more regular readings on September 9<sup>th</sup>, though I may slip in a reference to Constance and Her Companions that day as well!

As I wrote, one of the reasons I think this is a worthwhile project is that we'll have the chance to learn about saints and angels and events that we just don't hear much about unless we're very diligent in saying the Daily Offices. Today proves no exception.

Unfortunately, we don't know much about St. Bartholomew! Other than his mention in Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the Synoptic Gospels – and the mention of Nathaniel who may be Bartholomew in the Gospel of John, that's it. Brief mentions of his name as an Apostle. No star-struck revelations, no conversations with our Lord, just not much of anything, and yet the early Church saw fit to place him on the calendar of saints.

There are traditions – that he preached in India, that he planted Christianity in Armenia, but...well, there's just not a whole lot to go on.

Perhaps – just perhaps – it was due to some early clergyman's ghoulish fascination with Bartholomew's death. Tradition has it that poor Bartholomew was found guilty of converting the king of Armenia to Christianity – and the king's enraged brother had Bartholomew flayed alive and crucified upside down.

Now I don't know about you, but being flayed – skinned alive, that is – is not the way I wish to depart this world. Artistic images of Bartholomew, such as in Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*, show him as nothing but...well, skin and bones. There's actually a statue of him in Milan – his muscles and bones are clearly depicted, and he seems to be holding some sort of scarf, or a robe...but...it is his *skin*. Yuck.

There are all sorts of saints to whom honor is given through the church year, for many of them, not just Bartholomew, there is very little known. And perhaps that's why today's Gospel lesson was chosen. For although we only have scant reference and little tradition to go on regarding St. Bart, Jesus tells his disciples,

“the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.”

A riff on “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” “Blessed are the meek.” “Come to me as little children.”

The apostles, you see, are having an argument. “I’m the greatest!” “No, I am!” “Jesus likes me more!” “No, he likes *me* more!” “No, *me!*” “No, *me!*”

Parents of more than one child: Does this sound at all familiar?

And oh, by the way, this all takes place at the last supper. Right after the first Eucharist.

Good timing, huh?

Good grief.

OK, I’ll cut them some slack.

The verses immediately prior to today’s reading in Luke report that one of the disciples is about to betray Jesus – and so the disciples begin to argue about who could do such a thing. Who’s more important, who comes first, who comes last...

And how does Jesus respond?

He turns the world’s standards *upside down*. Greatness in the kingdom of God is not the same as greatness in the kingdoms of the Gentiles – or the kingdoms of any other people. The leader in the kingdom of God is a servant – just as Jesus is a servant to all humankind.

Jesus tells the disciples that to become great in the kingdom of God, they have to give up their prior assumptions about greatness. That they must give up their desire for greatness. They must become humble. Servants.

Jesus’ commentary is so convoluted, like a Mobius strip that keeps moving out and coming back, moving out and coming back – humility, greatness, servanthood, thrones – like just about everything else about Jesus, it’s countercultural, counterintuitive, unreasonable, radical, and revolutionary. Jesus’ whole message about servanthood and greatness turns everything we know about power upside down.

And that is precisely his point.

His point is that the kingdom of God is unlike any other kingdom we know.

His point is that greatness in the kingdom has less to do with power and more to do with *giving up* power.

His point is that the kingdom is based on faithfulness. Faithfulness and the reckless love of God.

Power, prestige, authority, position – such human desires. The problem is, when we seek power, when we have power, we're on a slippery slope toward divinity – and divine we can not be. A philosopher whose name I can't find wrote, "Every man would like to be God if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility."

Jesus says don't even bother: become a servant instead.

Don't try to be God: become a servant instead.

Forget who is first, who is second, who is third: become a servant instead.

In serving, you see, we are being the hands of Christ in a broken world. And that is the road to true greatness – not a greatness that is rewarded by titles and honors, but greatness that originates in submission to the One who creates, loves, and sustains us all.

And it's hard going, this notion of servanthood.

We want power. We want prestige. We want control. Who among us doesn't get a bit discouraged when things don't go *our way*?

But our way, says God, is not necessarily the way of our Lord. *Our way* is not necessarily the way toward the kingdom. *Our way* is not necessarily the way of love.

William Jennings Bryan was a three-time Democratic candidate for President of the United States. He was one of the most popular public speakers of his day – around the turn of the last century – and was a devout Presbyterian. Although he never made it to the White House, I think that he understood power very well. He said, "The great need of the world today is the spiritual power necessary for the overthrow of evil, for the establishment of righteousness, and for the ushering in of the era of perpetual peace; and that spiritual power begins in the surrender of the individual to God."

"...the spiritual power for the overthrow of evil...the establishment of righteousness...the ushering in of perpetual peace." That doesn't sound much like earthly power, does it. But that's what Jesus is getting at. Surrender to God, surrender and servanthood and serving and being quite content, quite happy in

fact, with *not* being powerful. Being quite satisfied in serving instead of being served. Being quite enthralled in being loved.

It is clear that one needn't have a long autobiography filled with miracles and wise pronouncements to be included in the church calendar of feasts – or our own private calendar of saints. One simply needs to be a disciple. A follower. A servant. Serving humankind for the sake of God. Serving without claim to position or prestige or power. Serving...because that's what Jesus did. And because that's what Jesus asks us to do.

And that will bring the kingdom of God closer.

Amen.

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I would be remiss if I neglected to mention a few miracles attributed to St. Bartholomew. Two popular ones originate on the small island of Lipari, off the coast of Sicily, where legend has it that some of Bartholomew's bones washed up on the shore. When St. Bartholomew's body was found, or what was left of it, the Bishop of St. Christopher's Church ordered some men to retrieve his body. When they tried to move the body, it was too heavy – it wouldn't be budged. The Bishop then sent out some children who easily brought the body ashore even though the older men couldn't.

“Ever since his discovery on the island, the people of Lipari celebrated his feast day annually. The tradition of the people was to take the solid silver and gold statue from inside the Cathedral of St. Bartholomew and carry it through the town. When taking the statue down the hill towards the town, it suddenly got very heavy and had to be set down. When the men carrying the statue regained their strength they lifted it a second time. After another few seconds, it got even heavier. They set it down and attempted once more to pick it up. They managed to lift it but had to put it down one last time. Within seconds, the walls further downhill collapsed. If the statue had been able to be lifted, all of the townspeople would have been killed.” (From: Wikipedia)

One might suggest, then, that Bartholomew is not only the patron saint of tanners, but perhaps of Weight-Watchers as well.