

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
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“Eleventh Sunday after Trinity”

ST BARTHOLOMEW’S DAY 2020

Just before lockdown I joined one of my godchildren and his family to visit one of the most secret places in the country. Where on earth did we go? Well, to Bletchley Park near Milton Keynes, a place where some people worked in complete secrecy during the 2nd WW decoding secret messages from the Germans. It is one of the most remarkable stories of the war and it is said that over 12,000 different persons (some 80% of them women) were assigned there at various points throughout the war to break the German enigma code. It is a fascinating place, not least because its story has only been discovered in the last 20 or so years. Indeed I well remember when I first worked in MK in the early 1990’s that BP was still marked on the map simply as a Post Office Training Centre – no more than that – and was due to be demolished for housing. Thankfully it was saved and it is now recognised world-wide as the place which probably shortened the war by between 2 to 4 years. Churchill referred to the Bletchley staff as “The geese that laid the golden eggs and never cackled”, never talked – for the secrecy of everyone who worked there was absolute. Even today there are people alive who will still not speak about their wartime work there – and many of their names will remain unknown, ordinary people who made such an extra-ordinary contribution to ending the Second World War.

I mention this because tomorrow we are celebrating someone else unknown and ordinary – one of the more unknown followers of Jesus, who was also something of an enigma. In Mark chapter 3, Bartholomew is named as one of the 12 apostles, but confusingly is often identified as being the same person as Nathanael. It is unclear why the name change – and we know nothing more of his life, though it is said that he helped spread Christianity throughout India. Legend has it that he died and his body was taken to Rome – and his church there became a famous centre of medical expertise, hence the naming of St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. But we know nothing more about him. An ordinary follower, a quiet and unassuming disciple of Christ, who

undoubtedly contributed much to the founding and spread of this new faith called Christianity and who we have to imagine as one of the crowd of disciples, faithfully present, through thick and thin, but who did nothing notable enough to be recorded in the Gospels -something of a contrast to Simon Peter, of course, who features prominently in the Gospels and not least in today's passage.

Someone once said "God likes ordinary people – it is why he made so many of them". It is true because most people are ordinary. Most of us live very ordinary lives – not boring or uninteresting, let me hasten to say, but lives that just are. We are never going to make the headlines – thankfully – but we are just people who are here to live our lives on earth as faithfully and as well as we can. We try to do the good, small things that will help our neighbours and our community. But of such is the kingdom of God – for "God likes ordinary people – it is why he made so many of them." Like Peter, Nathanael recognised Jesus for who he was and was faithful in his following. In fact there is a clue when we learn that the Hebrew of Nathanael means 'God gives' – highly appropriate for he recognised the gift of God to the world in the person of Jesus. Jesus recognised in Bartholomew/Nathanael someone who was a truly genuine person, in whom there was nothing false – 'one of the steady, faithful and reliable people who stay out of the limelight but get on with things none the less', as a recent article has put it.

For our part, we have recognised the great gift of God, and done something about it. Those thousands who helped to shorten the war by their secret work at Bletchley Park had no real idea what a difference they were making. Individually they were doing their job, steady, faithful and reliable people who 'stayed out of the limelight but got on with things none the less'. There have been millions of such faithful people through the ages – and we are called to be of their number today, to follow their example of living without fuss. We won't always know the difference we are making, but nevertheless God calls us to be faithful, to be full of faith.

So what we must do by our discipleship, by our faithful following, is, like Bartholomew and Simon Peter, is to place Jesus of Nazareth as the central pivot of our lives and leave the rest up to God.