A Sermon for the Feast of Saint Bartholomew

If you're wondering what connects the Gospel passage to Bartholomew, you'd be in very good company. There is no mention of his name in the short passage we heard from the Gospel according to John.

Yet he does feature in the passage. The name Bartholomew means "son of Tolmai" (Bar-Tolmay) in Aramaic, so Bartholomew is a patronymic – a name based on his Father's name. We can consider it his surname. His given name, we believe, is Nathanael.

So Nathanael Bartholomew is at the centre of today's Gospel reading.

We are in the first chapter of the Gospel according to John, and the disciples are being called to follow Jesus. Philip goes and finds Nathanael so he can introduce him to Jesus. Philip enthusiastically speaks about Jesus, calling him, the one "about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote".

Nathanael asks, rather cynically, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" His scepticism is tangible. The thing is that we, and Philip, both know that the answer to Nathanael's question is an emphatic "YES". Yet this also connects to Jesus experience of being unappreciated by his hometown, as they could not comprehend how the little boy they knew and saw growing up has become a man filled with wisdom and divine authority.

Philip's response is a pure invitation: "Come and see". It also echoes the many times in scripture that Jesus will offer that same invitation. Philip wants Nathanael to come and meet Jesus, to encounter the person whom he encountered, and in whom he has come to believe.

Jesus greets him warmly, saying "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" He acknowledges him as an honest person, and welcomes him. Nathanael asks Jesus how he knows these things about him. Jesus says to him, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." What Jesus said to briefly is a powerful idea – he knew that Nathanael was a decent person, just through observation at a distance. His divinity gives him the wisdom to know who to call, and who to encourage.

Nathanael then responds with a profound declaration of faith, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" From a cynical initial reaction to Jesus, Nathanael is now able to profess his faith. Jesus asks Nathanael whether his words have convinced

him, and then promises that he will see extraordinary things, including “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Throughout this passage we see Nathanael be invited to meet Jesus, do so, and respond to him with faith and reverence. It is a powerful journey into discipleship depicted at speed. And Nathanael would join the disciples and follow Jesus.

“Come and see” is one of the best phrases we hear in scripture. It is short, it is meaningful, and it appeals to much in our human nature. It is an invitation to discover something. It brings out a sense of enquiry and exploration. To me, it does not feel like a command, but an opportunity.

It is also an invitation that we can offer others. It takes a little courage, and a dose of confidence, but we can invite others to come and see what it is about faith, and about God, that we find valuable and meaningful. Think of how many times someone introduced you to something you came to enjoy – a book, a piece of music, a film, a food, a place, a person … and think of what it feels like to have something you wish to share with others and sense that they will also appreciate. Well, faith is also one of those things. We can invite others to Church. We can gently offer to show them what about this place appeals to us, speaks to us, and connects us to God. When we are bold enough do this, we channel our inner Philip, who helped Nathanael to his encounter with Jesus.

And it’s worth thinking about the things we value about our Church, about this community, that are worth sharing. You might tell people about the sense of prayerfulness in this building, about the reverence that underpins our worship, about the beauty of the music that is part of our liturgy, about the warmth of the hospitality that we share … It extends beyond the wall of the Church too; at this time of year, you might invite them to walk through the jonquil-scented garden and enjoy its peace.

We cannot expect success at the first go, and we might need to carefully think about how we might phrase the invitation, but if we are thoughtful, we might be pleasantly surprised. And that is one way that we grow, person by person, and spread the good news. After all, Jesus called the disciples one by one, and was patient as he did so. That’s how the Kingdom of God was built, and it’s up to us to continue sharing, and adding to it.

Rev. Dr Emily Fraser
All Saints, South Hobart and St Raphael’s, Fern Tree
The Feast of Saint Bartholomew
23 August 2026