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## THE GREATNESS OF AN APOSTLE

We do not know much about Bartholomew except his name, and that he was an apostle. According to Church tradition, it is said that he preached the gospel of Christ in India (which in those days was a rather vague temr covering much of south Asia) and died a martyr in Armenia, after being skinned alive. That is why his traditional symbol is the flenching knife; and he is sometimes portrayed in art – most famously in the Sistine chapel – with his own flayed skin hanging over his arm. In the Middle Ages, with an indelicate sense of humour, he was made the patron of butchers, and all artisans who worked in leather – tanners, curriers, shoemakers, glovemakers, and bookbinders. But if church tradition is loquacious, Scripture is reticent about his personal qualities and life story, and we must take that reticence seriously. By denying our natural curiosity about them Scripture forces us to focus on what is of primary important to us – his calling to be an apostle of Jesus Christ.

In the lesson chosen centuries ago for his feast day (St. Luke 22.24-30), we find the apostles at the last supper, bickering about “which of them should be accounted the greatest”, when, as they confidently expected, the authority and power of the Kingdom would be bestowed upon their Master, Jesus of Nazareth. As we know from other occasions, recorded by St. Matthew and St. Mark, they conceived of his Kingdom in rather worldly terms, and their ambitions were whetted by the thought of being his right-hand man, with first crack at the spoils of power and prestige. It is not an edifying display – but who are we too complain? Jockeying for position and prestige is a feature of every human society and institution, from the playground to the pulpit, in the worlds of business and politics, and even in marriage and friendship.

Greatness in the kingdom is not an unworthy desire, if it be rightly understood. Jesus began by correcting the apostles’ fantasies of power and prestige. “The kings of the Gentiles”, he told them, “exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called Benefactors.” It is a subtle reminder that they were talking just like the pagan rulers and officials they despised, who used the privileges and vast wealth of their positions to keep armies of dependents in ego-gratifying servility. “But ye shall not be so”, he told them, and turned upside down their worldly notions of greatness: “but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am

among you as he that serveth". The proper question, he is saying, is not 'which is the greatest in the Kingdom' but rather 'how those who are great in the Kingdom conduct themselves'. In his Kingdom, greatness is manifested in humble service.

The word "service" gets bandied about a great deal in our society. Schools require young people to undertake "service projects" in the community, designed to harness their energies towards the improvement of the world. Experts on business management talk about "servant-leadership" as a way of improving the productivity and effectiveness of one's employees. In this talk there is, I suppose, an echo of what Jesus is talking about. But his idea is more radical. In Biblical terms a servant is a slave, and a slave has no power to assert his own will; he is entirely at the disposal of the one he serves. To be great in the Kingdom of God, therefore, is to have given up one's rights, and one's own will, in favour of God's will. It is to put oneself entirely at the service of God, as Jesus did, even though it meant death, the death of the cross. Following in the footsteps of the servant of the Lord, the apostles must deny themselves.

That is a hard saying, no question about it: but Jesus only takes away worldly ambition, that he may give them true greatness in the Kingdom of God: "Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations" he tells the apostles; "and I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel". It is by obedience that men learn how to command; and those who put themselves at the service of God become the willing instruments of his almighty will, and are entrusted with power and authority from on high. When the Lord's Servant, who humbled himself unto death, even the death of the cross, was highly exalted in his resurrection, and given all authority in heaven and earth; those who followed him in humble service of God were commissioned to claim the allegiance of all nations to him.

For an apostle is "someone who is sent" -- an emissary or ambassador of the Kingdom of God, sent to announce the Kingdom's coming in Jesus Christ, and to claim men's allegiance to him, through words and deeds of grace and power. "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5.20). The words are St. Paul's, but he speaks for all the apostles - and for those of us who profess the apostolic faith.

The renunciation of worldly ambition for the service of the Kingdom of God requires a radical conversion of the mind and will, a transformation of outlook and desire. Paul speaks of this conversion as an ongoing process - a "putting off" of "the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts", and a "putting on" of the "new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4.22-24). It is this same image (of putting off and putting on clothing) which perhaps lies behind the traditional imagery of Bartholomew's martyrdom. He was flayed alive; but the Lord clothed him in immortal glory. A bit grisly no doubt: but a vivid symbol of the radical transformation which God works in those whom he has called to the service and glory of his kingdom. May this conversion be our holy desire; may we with Bartholomew come to 'love what he believed, and proclaim what he taught'.

**The Rev. Gavin G. Dunbar**

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