

TRINITY NEWS

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Saints and their stories.

Yesterday was the feast of St Bartholomew the Apostle – one of the 12. Or was he? He's only mentioned by name in the Synoptic Gospels – St. John doesn't mention him though he has been identified with Nathaniel, who appears only in John as one of the Apostles. But some scholars dispute this identification, and the fact is, at this point we don't know and probably never will. There are several stories about Bartholomew's later life. He is said to have gone to India as a missionary, though just where he evangelized is in dispute – and to have been martyred there. It is also said that, along with Thaddeus, Bartholomew brought Christianity to Armenia, and that he was martyred there by crucifixion, after some rather nasty torture. Armenia subsequently became the first country to officially adopt Christianity, and Bartholomew along with Thaddeus, is today its patron saint.

None of this of course is strictly speaking 'historical.' Bartholomew cannot have been martyred in India and Armenia at the same time, of course, and there are no contemporary historical records to back either claim. But that's not at all surprising – if you look at the post-Pentecost career of most of the Apostles. Andrew is said to have founded churches in Cyprus, Byzantium, Georgia, the Ukraine, Romania and several other places, and though he never went there, his body is said to have been brought to some Pictish King in Northern Scotland very early on where he is, of course today the patron. James is said to have preached in Spain, Matthias in Ethiopia, and so forth. Again, none of these stories has firm historical foundation.

Some may find this disturbing, the fact that so many of these stories might not be true – not only in the case of the Apostles but also of other such celebrated saints like St. George. But actually, all cultures (and we are, among other things, a culture) have their legends and myths, and these figures have served as an inspiration to many. Moreover, to my mind, it all comes down to names. After all, someone brought Christianity to Armenia, we might as well call him Bartholomew. Someone founded the Church in India, whether we call him Bartholomew or Thomas doesn't make much difference. We are celebrating real events with real consequences and the persons that caused them.