

COLLEGE OF ST.BARNABAS, LINGFIELD
Patronal Festival Evensong
June 11th 2009
Lord Carey of Clifton

I am delighted to be with you for your Patronal Festival Evensong and I thank Fr. Such for his invitation and welcome. It is good to be here as we give thanks for the foundation of this place and the vision of Canon William Cooper who, with other leaders, established this College in 1895.

I wonder if you noticed those four words in Act 9. ‘But Barnabas took him’. You have the good fortune to have as your spiritual patron one of the most influential of New Testament Christians, even if he has been relegated to the point of obscurity by the later church. We hear so much about Peter and Paul but Barnabas is virtually ignored. This is very odd, because we actually know a great deal about Barnabas and what we know is impressive indeed, We are told in Acts 4 that he came from Cyprus, that he was a Jew who, probably upon his baptism, was named Barnabas. He was quite wealthy but upon his conversion, in Luke’s words ‘he brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet’.. It is very probable that he was one of the Jews who journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and who was converted to Christ on the day of Pentecost. Barnabas is mentioned 21 times in the Acts of the Apostles; twice in Galatians, once in 1 Corinthians and once in Colossians. In other words, Barnabas was certainly more than a bit player in the infant church; indeed, for a period of time he is seen as senior to Paul in the mission of the Church, as initially

he is mentioned several times before Paul himself. Jimmy Dunn, in his commentary calls him: ‘a man of rare quality, a community builder, able to promote and sustain warm and constructive personal relations’. What more can we say about him and what message might he bring to us and our generation?

‘But Barnabas took him’. The context in the second lesson is one of fear. Saul, the persecutor of the church, has joined the fellowship as a professed believer, This seemed to good to be true – perhaps a little like Sir Alan Sugar repenting of his Apprentice programme and giving up all his wealth to work as a volunteer for the Women’s Institute!

So it is hardly surprising that many Christians were suspicious. Barnabas is introduced as the one who befriends Paul and makes the introduction to the Church. He took the now repentant Saul and brought him to the apostles. He made the introduction; he had the nerve, the confidence, to take the plunge and become the middle man. But, of course, his name after all, means ‘the son of encouragement’. As you know the etymology is uncertain; it could be ‘son of exhortation’ or ‘son of consolation’. I prefer the rendering of ‘son of encouragement’ because this represents his nature, more than exhorting or consoling. Barnabas is the kind of man you want on your team because there is no negativism in him; he is direct, warm and approachable. He is the first who will look with hope on a new convert and see fresh possibilities in him. And so it is with respect to St.Paul; Paul is taken and encouraged. And even later, when friction develops between John Mark and St.Paul, we find Barnabas, in the middle, holding on to both friends

and very possibly being the link that leads to John Mark being such a comfort to St. Paul in his old age. St. Luke who is not always given to effusive statements says of Barnabas 'for he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith'.

Don't we need more disciples like Barnabas in the church today? People who are prepared to confront fear, prepared to reach out to others and see Christ in the unlikely stranger? I am of the generation and, as I look around, I notice that some of you are of my generation and wonder if you agree with me that the current church lacks confidence- indeed, is often fearful. In fact, I would go so far as to say it is a timid church and almost pathetically grateful when people bother to turn up at church. It seems to have withdrawn from an expectation to make disciples and call people into a self denying, yet life enhancing new relationship with Jesus Christ. It reminds me of a notice I saw in a parish magazine which read: 'The Low Esteem Support Group will meet on Thursday in the Church Hall. Please use the back door'. When morale goes, institutions and people are in trouble. Perhaps I am being too hard because the times are tough and secularism is deep in our land. Within my lifetime, Christianity has moved from being an important part of the cultural and moral landscape of Britain to becoming a struggling, counter-cultural institution. This is not entirely a bad thing, of course. At last, in our country, it is now possible to understand the real nature of the Christian faith and to know it as a missionary faith that calls people to follow a living Lord. I remain quite convinced however that Barnabas's qualities are greatly needed in our day. We will always need people of

confident faith, whose lives have been transformed by an encounter with Christ.

‘But Barnabas took him’.

I am sure, like me, you can look back to those moments when you were taken by someone and helped by a person who took you by the hand and led you deeper into faith. I recall Eric Vevers, the curate at my church in Dagenham, who one day said to me ‘I believe, George, that God wants you in the ordained ministry’. No one had ever said that to me before. I was 17 years of age and about to go into the RAF to do my national service. That remark was not an idle statement that was left dangling. He followed it up by encouragement and by taking interest for some years to come. I owe so much to that man and his enthusiastic life style.

You know, Christian service never ends. Some of us may be retired; some might be infirm, some might feel at times that they are in a prison of some kind that forbid Christian service. I wonder did Dietrich Bonhoeffer feel that when he was imprisoned in Flossenbergl Concentration camp? I am sure he did. It did not stop him writing ‘Letters from Prison’ because he refused to entertain the idea that his work was over. He wanted to go on teaching and encouraging others.

Might not this encourage some of us, from our particular confinement to mentor others, by the occasional telephone call, by the affirming letter, by the occasional gift? Never assume your work is over- even today there is something for us to do and, even today, there is the possibility that God might surprise us through someone whose name will probably not be Barnabas, but who will act very much like him.

I think, for example, of Matthew the Poor. Have you ever heard of him? I met him some ten years ago when I visited the Coptic Church of Egypt. Matthew the Poor, Abbot of the monastery of St. Macarius, was an unlikely monk. He wasn't always Matthew the Poor. For many years he was a very prosperous man who built up a successful pharmacy business. One day he was on a train travelling to another city to buy another pharmacy when God spoke to him. He said that the voice was as clear as day. It asked him if he really wanted to just get rich and for what purpose? 'Come and follow me'. He got off the train and returned home. The following day he left to live as a solitary in the wilderness. 11 other people joined him. After ten years, the 12 men went to the famous monastery of St. Macarius where four old monks were the only monks left. Sand covered everything- making it even impossible to enter the main door of the church. Matthew was admitted and gave everything to the monastery. Through his riches, but more importantly, through his enthusiasm, faith, knowledge and ability, St. Macarius's monastery once again became a flourishing place of pilgrimage and faith. He became known as Fr. Matta el-Maskeen and without exaggeration made as significant a contribution to the Coptic Church as the fiery Pope Shenoudah. The Coptic church was revived through Matthew, or now Fr. Matta's remarkable ministry – his writings and spirituality. When he arrived at St. Macarius monastery there were only four monks, at his death there were 130. Matthew died a few years ago, penniless, but like his Lord he made many rich.

But back to Barnabas. Perhaps it was fitting that a humble disciple of the Lord, like Barnabas, should

quietly disappear into obscurity. After all, Christian discipleship is about selfless service, not about what legacy you leave behind or how we might be remembered. How foolish it is to yearn after fame or to acquire a great name! What matters is the service we render, the faithful ministry we have give, the support we have and the struggling disciple of Christ we have sought to be. We admire Barnabas as one of the great missionaries of the early church, who was deeply committed to his vocation to serve the Lord. Few of us, indeed, few in our generation have attained his level of dedication. No matter, the challenge facing all Christians today is to follow the Lord that Barnabas worshipped. Knowing that, some twenty centuries after his death, there is the same work to be done, the same message of Christ to be proclaimed and the same bridge building to do.

So, in our Patronal Festival, we remember this great servant of God and pray that the College of St. Barnabas will continue to live and work in his spirit and through his example. That is what we celebrate today, and that is why Timothy Dudley-Smith's hymn encourages us to emulate Barnabas's life:

“An elder, skilled in teaching,
To nurture and defend,
Who shared the work of preaching
And made of Paul a friend;
A faithful, fearless Pastor,
Whose theme was Christ alone,
He lived to serve his Master
And made his gospel known”.

George Carey