

The Feast of St Barnabas

The College of St Barnabas 2012

It is a day of giving thanks. Thanks for St Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement. Thanks for the College of St Barnabas. Thanks on the Feast of Corpus Christi for the Eucharist at the heart of the life of the College of St Barnabas. To which I would want to add thanks for the Christian ministry that those who live here at the College of St Barnabas have all offered over the years in a variety of situations and which through your prayers you continue to offer. And all of that caught up in the Church's great sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for the Lord Jesus Christ and for all benefits of his passion. So, yes, a day of thanksgiving.

Barnabas! So what do we know? More than we do about most of the saints of the apostolic age. Most of what we know is drawn from the Acts of the Apostles. Let me remind you, though you almost certainly need no reminding.

In Chapter 4 of the Acts, we read:

Great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "Son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Now Chapter 9, the passage we have heard this afternoon:

When Saul had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

And then Chapter 11. Here Barnabas, in collaboration still with Paul, is coming to the aid of the needy. Indeed through all these chapters Barnabas and Paul are at work together, fellow missionaries preaching the faith, companions through thick and thin. At one point mistaken for gods. Paul they thought was Mercury and Barnabas Jupiter.

But then there comes at the end of Chapter 15 a quite crucial passage, which I'll give you in full, before we try to draw all this together:

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord.

And that is the last that the scriptures tell of him, though tradition sees him as the evangeliser of his native Cyprus, and a legend portrays his death at Salamis in the year 61 of the Christian era.

There are just two words I'd like you to think about in relation to good Saint Barnabas. The second is the one from which he gets his name, but, first, generosity. Of all the New Testament saints, none is more generous than Barnabas. All the four passages to which we have referred point to this. In Acts, Chapter 4, we have the beginning of it and its most straightforward expression. Barnabas is generous about material things. He is a well-to-do man, and he gives the lot to the Christian cause. I want to go on to remind you of how Barnabas was generous also in his judgements, but let us not pass over this first instance of generosity too lightly. There is always a tendency in the Christian world to spiritualise, so to speak, every story. We talk about generosity in every way except the most obvious – hard cash. We rather fight shy of it. But remember that Barnabas's generosity of judgement was all part and parcel of a straightforward generous disposition that began with a wild generosity in material things. If we are to try to imitate his example, we should remember that it begins in practical generosity of a whole-hearted sort.

But, yes, it does go on to Barnabas's generosity of judgement. It is he who befriends the newly converted Saul, when everyone else was deeply suspicious. Just think of the implications of that bit of generosity! What kind of Christianity would have emerged if Saul had been left out in the cold? Barnabas is generous in his judgement, trusting, forgiving, full of faith, and so embraces Saul, and out of their friendship emerges Paul the apostle of the gentiles. I do think all those elements are there in Barnabas's generosity. He shows a trust in people that believes them to be genuine, a forgiveness that can let the past go (and what a past there was from the martyrdom of Stephen downwards to Saul the persecutor), and a faith that God knows what God is doing.

And of course it reaches its ironic climax in Acts 15 when it is that very same generosity that causes Barnabas to part company with that very same Paul. John Mark, their young missionary companion, had let them down. He had not survived the course. He had gone home to Mummy, so to speak, half way through the expedition. Saul could not risk using him again – nothing less than the imperishable message of salvation was at stake. So no risks. But Barnabas insists on another chance. Barnabas trusts John Mark and believes he is genuine. Barnabas forgives John Mark and can put the past failure behind. Barnabas has faith that God has it all under control. And, generous as he may be, he's tough too, and stands up to Paul, parts company with him and takes John Mark off to Cyprus. Generosity of judgement even when it means a painful break with a much-loved friend. I wonder whether Paul saw the irony of it all?

It was not a permanent quarrel, for in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which describes a later situation, Paul is speaking of him in an affectionate way. Scripture does not tell us who made the first move to patch up their relationship. But I think you might guess!

A saint is always a mirror of the divine. Let me remind you of these words of Paul in the Second Letter to the Corinthians:

For you know his generous act, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Paul might have written it of Barnabas. But in fact it was of Jesus that he wrote.

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

And, though Barnabas is an encouragement to us in his emulation of the generosity of Christ, it is to Jesus that he, like all the saints, points. It is Jesus also who bids us to be generous in every way and shows us in his servant Barnabas how that generosity can encompass both practical giving and generosity of judgement. We must not fail to learn from that.

There's a clear Christian message for the Feast of St Barnabas. It has, as they say, general application. What might it mean in the College of St Barnabas? It might mean a generosity about the innovators, the people who are leading the Church in new directions. It is sometimes quite difficult to stand back and see things we have done and a Church we have loved changed. Generosity of judgement is something we need to pray for when we think the vicar after us (or in some cases the third vicar after us) is taking the parish off in a direction very different from the way we thought things ought to go.

But the need for generosity may be nearer home. Generosity can be about making allowances. Certainly it was for Barnabas in relation to both John Mark and Paul. You are all growing older here (well, I'm growing older too - there's no escaping it; we all do!) and I guess sometimes you are not as alert as you used to be, you are slower than you used to be, sometimes your neighbour, who probably talks too loudly because he's a bit deaf, gets on your nerves. Just occasionally you probably recognise you get on his nerves because you won't speak up! May be you sometimes pontificate about things a bit - it does sometimes come with the wisdom of mature years! It also comes to bishops! Here in your common life together in the College of St Barnabas, be a company of Barnabases, always generous in dealings with one another.

And now that other word. "Barnabas" means Son well, the scriptures translate it in several ways: "Son of Consolation", "Son of Exhortation", "Son of Encouragement". Barnabas made people feel valuable. When he trusted them, when he forgave them, when he had faith that God knew what he was doing with them, they were consoled, they were encouraged. Of course they were. They were being taken seriously, they were being affirmed, their value was being asserted. Paul was consoled and encouraged by Barnabas after the conversion trauma. The Christians in Judaea, suffering from the famine, were consoled and encouraged by generous Barnabas, visiting with Paul and bringing relief. John Mark was consoled and encouraged by Barnabas when he was given his second chance.

I think perhaps we underrate encouragement as a Christian virtue. What an enormous difference it made in the lives that Barnabas touched. What an enormous difference you could make in people's lives if you went out of your way to encourage, to affirm, to give value. We spend so much of our lives putting people down. People need lifting, encouraging, consoling. When they receive that, it's not just that it raises their spirits, but that they grow in confidence in the service of the Lord.

You know this, of course, from your ministry as priests or the spouses of priests. Always you needed in the parish to affirm and to encourage, often by saying thank you, often to build up confidence, often to raise people from low self-esteem. It's not so obvious how you do it, perhaps, in retirement. Of course there is the encouraging of one another here that is

an extension of the generosity towards one another of which I've already spoken. Encouragement to one among you who has been bereaved, encouragement to one who is struggling with physical pain, relearning to walk after surgery perhaps, encouragement about a good sermon or some sensitive prayers.

But there is more encouraging you can do from here out into the life of the Church. Write letters to encourage people to whom you have ministered. Send emails (if you're into that) to the preacher when you hear a good sermon. Write to the parish or the cathedral whose stunning service you hear on the radio. Keep sending encouraging postcards to the people for whom you pray. Be a Barnabas. It is a wonderful calling and it can continue when a great many other bits of ministry have had to stop. Wouldn't it be marvellous if we were all sons and daughters of encouragement?

But, again, don't get stuck on Barnabas. Just as his generosity pointed to the generosity of Jesus Christ, so this marvellous work of encouragement tells us, in the end, not something about Barnabas, but about the work of the Holy Spirit. Paraclete, Consoler, Comforter, Advocate, Encourager, Animator. Can you see that the words that were attached to Barnabas are essentially the words we use to describe the work of the Holy Spirit? In the end it is not Barnabas who by his generosity encourages into life, provides the consolation that affirms, but the Spirit of God, the Comforter Divine, the one who is the Life-giver. How marvellously was that Holy Spirit at work in Barnabas, the Holy Spirit that made him so alive with the joy and generosity of the gospel. How marvellously can he make us alive as we seek to follow Christ and his saints.

From Barnabas you can learn something of the generosity of Christ and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. Generosity and encouragement – two words to take to heart as we thank God for Saint Barnabas as we anticipate his feast day.

+Michael Gloucester: