

## The College of St Barnabas, Lingfield

### St Barnabas Day, June 11<sup>th</sup> 2008

I wonder how many of the clergy who are listening to me can cast your minds back to your ordination as a Deacon in the Church of God and to your first ordination retreat. Mine was in Southwark Cathedral at Michaelmas in 1956 ( a mere 52 years ago, you say to yourselves), and the retreat was at Greyladies. I remember very little about either event but I do recall that the retreat conductor was the then Warden of St Barnabas Dormansland. So in a sense I was launched into my ministry from this college, and it therefore gives me great pleasure to be returning today to offer my thanks for this place and for the long line of clergy and their spouses who have graced it with their presence down to the present day. All of us who are here as your guests thank you for your many years of faithful service for Jesus Christ and His Church, often in far-distant parts of the world, and we are delighted to join with you in honouring your patron saint, St Barnabas.

Barnabas is surely one of the most well-liked of all the saints. He was warm and welcoming, mission-hearted and gospel-centred, dedicated, courageous, considerate and a man with a mind of his own. He has long been one of my favourites and I can well understand why he was chosen to be the patron of this college. His name 'Son of encouragement' typifies many of the qualities that we most admire and covet for ourselves.

I particularly like the way his name is gently woven into the plot of the Book of Acts early on in chapter 4. Just his name, Joseph, his country of origin, Cyprus, his priestly calling, a Levite, the nickname he was later given, Barnabas, and the fact of his commendable generosity in selling some land and giving all the proceeds for the work of the Church. Two verses, and then no more mention until five chapters later when his gifts of a very different kind were needed by the church in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, he was passed over in the selection of the seven deacons, when you might have thought that such a dedicated and generous property man would be just the type they wanted to administer the Church's welfare provisions. But the name of Barnabas is not even mentioned as a possible candidate, and instead the author of the Acts fills his pages with the tragic episode of Ananias and Sapphira, the martyrdom of Stephen, the evangelistic achievements of Philip in Samaria and Gaza and the persecutions and subsequent conversion on the road to Damascus of Saul of Tarsus. All this while Barnabas lies dormant, of no particular interest to the historian Luke, until the time when he is ready to rise from his obscurity to stand up for the suspicious new convert whom some thought (not without reason in view of his track record) to be a charlatan. "Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the apostles. He told them how on his journey he had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus."

Mind you, that was Saul's story. But who was to believe him? And why were the apostles more inclined to believe it when told by Barnabas and not by Saul? I believe that the answer is that Barnabas was trusted in Jerusalem, not so much for his financial contributions but because his kinswoman, Mary, the mother of John Marh, was the lady of the house in which the church was praying when Peter was in prison. So Barnabas was an insider and his opinions were to be trusted. And he became Saul's advocate, his friend, his ally and his encouragement. And what a blessing

he was to him! Just think where the church of later generations might have been, had Saul of Tarsus been cold-shouldered by those early apostles. Thank you, Barnabas, for being such a son of consolation! Not that I particularly like the AV's use of that word, 'consolation'. Much better to use the word 'encouragement', as most modern versions do. Of course in Greek the word is *paraklesis* which is the work of the Holy Spirit, the *parakletos*, the inspirational go-between God, who does much the same sort of thing for us who are His children, standing by us, introducing us to the family, encouraging us by giving us His personal backing and sharing His many gifts with us. There are real similarities between the ministries of Barnabas and of the Holy Spirit!

In no time at all Saul of Tarsus justified the confidence Barnabas placed in him, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord, negating the appalling reputation he had once acquired through his persecutions of the church and instead incurring death threats from the very people who had once been his greatest admirers. His new family, the Christian brotherhood, now concerned for his life, arranged for him to be evacuated to his native Tarsus and to safety.

That might have closed the story, with Barnabas with the apostles in Jerusalem and Paul back where he belonged in his native Tarsus. But the church was not standing still. More and more places were coming under its influence. Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, all were hearing the good news of Jesus from scattered disciples or from travelling apostles. And in Antioch the movement grew to revival proportions. This time it was not only Jews who received the gospel but Greeks as well. It could have been an embarrassing development for a predominantly Jewish church, and back in Jerusalem the apostles heard the news with some anxiety. Who was available and of the right stature to send to clarify the position of the church in Antioch? Barnabas was their man. After all, he was from Cyprus and it was from Cyprus and Cyrene that these volunteer missionaries to Antioch had come. He of all people would advise them of the genuineness or otherwise of this movement of the Spirit.

So Barnabas, from being little more than a useful contact man in Jerusalem becomes the "apostolic delegate" to Antioch. He not only confirmed that this revival was of God but he also by his preaching and teaching brought many more to the Lord and the church positively mushroomed. Growing numerically stronger by the day, they acquired a new name, that of Christians first in Antioch. It was not just that they had been noticed. The church was becoming a nine-day wonder. Men and women were being converted in droves. Barnabas needed help in teaching the faith to all these new and doubtless muddled converts. His first thought was to recruit Paul to assist him by bringing to bear his proven teaching and debating skills. "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

Here was Spirit-filled encouragement once again. The reassurance given to the growing church in Antioch, the heady excitement of their seeing God's church growing by leaps and bounds as more and more newcomers joined their ranks, and then the encouragement of the reinforcements in the shape of the gifted teacher Paul to work alongside Barnabas for a full twelve-month in making the church in Antioch a strong and long-lasting outpost for the Gospel. And all this in a city that was 500 miles away from the centre of operations in Jerusalem. The church was beginning to span the world.

However, Antioch was not content with being a satellite of the mother church in Judaea, dependent on its mother's resources. The next thing we learn is that they were collecting for a substantial gift to assist their brothers in Jerusalem who were suffering from the effects of a wide-spread famine throughout the Roman world. Now Barnabas and Saul became the daughter church's conveyors of aid to the very people who had sent them out. The encouraged now became the encouragers as the heartened and confident Christians in Antioch brought cheer and practical help to the depleted and persecuted congregations in Jerusalem. Not only so, but having shared their good news of expanding numbers and increasing strength, they returned to Antioch to become themselves a missionary and a sending church. Acts 13 tells the story in the briefest of sentences. "In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, [You don't need all this talent in one church: spread it around!] 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands upon them and sent them out".

It was no surprise that their first port of call was Cyprus, but from there they went on throughout Turkey or Asia Minor, calling at a number of centres of population where were Jewish synagogues which provided them with opportunities to tell the story of Jesus as the awaited Christ or Messiah. By no means all believed the message but many did, congregations of Christians were established, leaders and elders were appointed to care for them and to bring them on, and eventually the two apostles returned to their home church to report on the great things God had done for them and through them.

It was during this missionary journey that something happened that only St Luke records. It may have meant nothing but you cannot read Acts without noticing it. They changed their names! Their description switches from being Barnabas and Saul to their being Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas, the old-established disciple, and Saul of Tarsus, the new convert. go forth together and come back home as Paul, the great scholar and spokesman for the faith and Barnabas his back-up man. Barnabas began to play second fiddle to the man whom he had sponsored and supported and brought on. From reading between the lines he was content for it to be so. He willingly yielded leadership to a man who was undoubtedly his intellectual superior - and demonstrated great grace in so doing. Only a big man can take the humbler part and defer to his former pupil. Maybe that is another mark of Barnabas's gift of *paraklesis*, his ability to model the Holy Spirit's character of being the one who in the unity of the Holy Trinity points to the Christ and glorifies Him. Whether that is so or not, his gracious humility comes as a great encouragement to all those of us who have to step down from a place of prominence to a mere supporting role in the service of Jesus Christ.

The story would not be complete without a mention, first of the Council of Jerusalem and then of the parting of the ways. The Council meeting, described in Acts 15, was called to deal with a knotty theological problem brought upon the church because of the growth of the congregation in Antioch, with both Jewish and Gentile converts disputing over the place of the Law of Moses in the New Testament church. Paul and Barnabas were key witnesses to the conflicts at issue and they were also key figures in working out the compromise that the apostles in Jerusalem adopted to hold the church together. The outcome was a success and has been a guide for subsequent generations of Christians in the handling of church disputes such as we have had to face in recent years and still do. We need all the wisdom, humanity and grace of today's Pauls and Barnabases in

the Lambeth conference meetings of the next few weeks. May our bishops and archbishops truly be sons of consolation and encouragement to God's people this year as in previous Lambeth years.

Then from the dispute resolved at Jerusalem we turn to the dispute unresolved as Paul and Barnabas clash with each other over the planning of a return visit to the scenes of their first missionary journey. The issue was a personal one. Could Barnabas's young cousin, John Mark, be trusted not to turn back, as he had done once before? Paul said no: Barnabas, understandably, said yes. Who was right? Was their eventual parting of the ways contrary to God's will, or in accordance with it? Who is to say? I would not dream of taking sides with one or the other. Each man had his convictions, his point of view. Despite their having worked together in harmony for such a long time, they both stuck by their guns. Their minds were independent of each other. They frankly disagreed: both were strong personalities and they could do no other. They went in different directions. The only redeeming note is that despite this God used them both in their different spheres and even John Mark came good, thanks not so much to St Paul's "tough love" but to the encouragement and "tender love" of his kinsman Barnabas.

Who could not fail to honour such a man? A patron saint worthy to be hymned and admired, a sponsor of others under whose sponsorship we are all proud and blessed to be counted and an apostle whose modelling of the Holy Spirit is an example and inspiration to us all.

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