

Sermon for The College of St Barnabas College Festival 2014

Ecclesiastes 12. 9-end

Acts 9. 26-31

Let me begin by saying what a pleasure and privilege it is to be here with you at the College of Saint Barnabas on this significant day in your calendar.

(I can honestly say that it is a date in the calendar that I have instantly been able to recall nearly all of my life because June 11th happens also to be my brother's birthday).

I think it is always a particular privilege to be invited to speak to a company of people who hold in common the experience of priestly ministry either from the 'inside' as it were - or from the intimate proximity of having been married to a priest.

Those of us who labour, even now, in licensed ministry - and come here to share in your worship - are bound to salute you and to honour you for the work that you have done and for the foundations you have laid for us to build upon.

On behalf of the Church of which you are members and in which you continue to bear witness, I warmly reiterate our thanks.

No one knows better than you, I fancy, what a challenge it is to say anything remotely new on a patronal festival.

Surely the years have seen a procession of preachers wring out of the appointed lections everything that can possibly be said about Saint Barnabas - and when the scriptures appear to have been exhausted - have they not raided every legend or myth into the bargain!

I am guessing that over the years this college has heard learned expositions on the terms 'Son of Encouragement' and 'Son of Consolation.'

Doubtless, some of my predecessors on this occasion have been a good deal better-read than me - but I doubt if anyone has yet quoted from Christopher Loveless' excellent book on the saints of the Anglican calendar; it is entitled *Strange Eventful History*.

Fr Christopher, presently the Vicar of Warnham, near Horsham writes the following about Barnabas:

We have seen how Saul was not exactly welcomed with open arms into the Christian Church. Some doubt was natural; very few groups would welcome a notorious persecutor into their inmost councils without suspicion. Saul was

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sponsored by a remarkable man, Joseph of Cyprus, known to all the Christians by his nickname, Barnabas, Mr Helpful.

So here we are commemorating the earliest of the 'Mister Men'

Fr Christopher's piece on Barnabas concludes:

His tomb can still be visited, but as it is in the Turkish part of the island, there is no local Christian community to tend it. A caretaker will unlock the gate for you to descend into the little vault and will sit on the steps and smoke while you look at the unmarked, unhonoured slab which marks the resting place of the man whose generosity of spirit determined the very name by which he is remembered.

It is upon that generosity of spirit that I should like us to dwell for a few minutes this afternoon.

Scripture records for us not only the generosity of a man who sold land and gave the proceeds to the church, but also the generosity with which Barnabas stood by Saul to commend him to the first Christians to encounter him after his conversion.

Barnabas, no less than them, must have been aware of Saul's reputation as a persecutor of those who followed The Way.

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Barnabas, like them, would once have been in Saul's firing line – at least until his conversion.

It was Barnabas whose generous heart was ready to recognise and to acknowledge and to trust the change that had happened within Saul.

He was ready to encourage the wary Christians to accept Saul and he was ready to encourage Saul in his evangelistic mission – not least by calling upon him to share in his own ministry.

What an encouragement he must have been to both!

Each of us needs encouragement at some time or another – to be given new courage, to feel supported and emboldened, to have our confidence renewed or restored.

Each of us needs encouragement to overcome reticence, timidity, diffidence or downright fear.

We need encouragement to recover from failure, criticism and low morale.

All of these will otherwise hold us back in prayer, in bearing witness and in evangelism.

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Reticence, timidity, diffidence, each of them, is a kind of fear and, as we know, the only thing utterly to cast out fear is – love.

What any encourager needs for those he or she wishes to encourage is love.

Barnabas loved Saul and wanted his gifts to be released; he saw the possibilities in this converted man and he loved him for them.

But Barnabas also loved the Church and wanted her to receive Saul's witness and ministry.

It was his love for both that made him 'Mr Helpful'.

The Church of England, no less than the Church in Damascus or Antioch or Cyprus, needs encouragement – to be filled with a new courage in the face of its difficulties.

It is all too easy for us to criticise, to find fault, to complain, to mourn for what it used to be or what it might have been.

Whatever disappointments or annoyances we might harbour with the Church, she is more likely to respond positively to encouragement than to our criticism.

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It is a great temptation, these days for people to look for some kind of clever plan, strategy or initiative to grow the church in numbers and in social engagement.

The cleverness of this plan or that in search of the right structure, the right evangelistic technique or formula, the right process or right theology and hermeneutics, is the stuff of many contemporary books – and as scripture reminds us this afternoon:

Many books and much study of them is a weariness of the flesh.

It is as if spreading the Gospel is some kind of intellectual riddle that needs to be worked out - and once it has been worked it out, - all will swiftly fall into place, filling pews and churches as well as hearts and minds.

I believe there is no such universal panacea, no such plan or scheme that on its own will short-circuit the call of the Christian community to live lives that distinctively speak of Jesus.

Jesus asks his followers to be light and salt.

If light goes dark and salt loses its flavour, then there is nothing distinctive of which to take notice and nothing that has a distinctively different flavour to everything else.

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Living life as a follower of Jesus of Nazareth is distinctive – and very distinctive – in a society where his influence seems to have declined.

But, of course, living a distinctively Christian life is costly too.

It risks ridicule.

It demands generosity with our money, our time and our talents.

It demands sacrifices of all kinds.

....and living such a life of course demands courage.

It takes courage to be sacrificial:

To miss out on things that always clash with worship

To miss out on things that cost more than our stewardship allows

To make ethical decisions in the shops

To be laughed at as credulous, gullible or pathetic

To put other people first

It takes courage to put our hope and trust in a God we cannot see and whom we glimpse - at best - through a glass darkly.

It takes encouragement – and that was the gift of Barnabas.

There is no more powerful motivation than that of being loved, valued and encouraged.

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Love emboldens us and gives us courage.

We dare to do things when we are encouraged by someone who loves us.

I remember, as a parish priest, being asked to take the wedding of a lady who had had a stroke whilst still in her 30s.

She used an electric wheelchair to get about and had done so for some years after every kind of support, therapy and treatment.

Her bus-driver boyfriend adored her; he loved her and encouraged her as no one else had done.

Patently he encouraged her and emboldened her to stand and begin to move her legs.

It was shaky and slow and nerve-wrackingly anxious, but she walked down the nave of the Church to be married.

It reminds me of what Paul has to say to us in I Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

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Love is the powerful ingredient that makes all the difference to our efforts.

What was it that emboldened that lady to walk after years of immobility?

I believe she was loved back to life and health.

It was love that encouraged her in such a way that eventually she could walk down that long nave.

Love motivates us in our relationships with friends and with family

Love emboldens our work and our mission

Love emboldens us to face the challenging phases of life – failure – tragedy – bereavement – illness and yes, death itself.

You are perhaps familiar with that poem which describes the movement from earthly life to the next in terms of a ship setting sail.

It concludes:

And just at the moment when someone at my side says,

'There she goes! ' ,

there are other eyes watching her coming,

and other voices ready to take up the glad shout:

'Here she comes!'

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Being loved through life and death is the greatest encouragement any of us could hope for.....but it is also our privilege to offer it and so, like Barnabas, to be sons and daughters of encouragement.

May God continue to bless us as we encourage and embolden one another along life's journey of faith and hope - with love.