

The 2017 Patronal Festival Sermon [Acts 14.8-end]

The Right Reverend Dr Rowan Williams

'Not what thou art, nor what thou hast been, beholdeth God with his merciful eyes, but what thou wouldst be.' [The Cloud of Unknowing, Ch. 75]

Words from one of the great mystical texts of the Middle Ages, words which speak to us of that most basic and important element in our Christian faith: trusting that God sees us with hope.

God sees us with the future in mind. God does not look at our record and God does not look at our present performance. Both of those are likely to be, in varying degrees, shabby, patchy and unsatisfactory, to put it mildly. God looks at what we would be, what we long to be. God looks at our desiring, and looks of course deeper than we can look, because 90% of the time we do not know actually what we want, what we desire. A great Roman Catholic theologian of the last generation said, "Christian morality is all about doing what you really want. The problem is finding out what that is."

Well, sometime in the first Christian century, Barnabas made the acquaintance of a rather unusual character. Small and nervous and short-tempered, extremely fluent, except when under high emotional pressure when he became just a tad incoherent, a profoundly difficult person to live and work with, by the name of Saul of Tarsus. Barnabas, in the name of the God he trusted and believed in, was able to see what this unpromising character desired. He was able to see that Saul of Tarsus longed, though he didn't know he was longing, to be a vehicle through which the Good News of God would reach the most unlikely and distant persons and societies imaginable.

There was a good deal that Barnabas might have spotted in terms of what Saul of Tarsus was and had been. He was exactly that difficult and rather obnoxious person I have just described, but he had been even worse; he had been a mortal enemy of the Good News of Jesus Christ and he had been a man imprisoned by his own righteousness. Somehow, Jesus Christ had persuaded him to let go of that. Confused and at sea, vulnerable and rather angry, Saul hangs for a bit in mid-air in the story of the Acts of the Apostles, until we are told Barnabas took him and introduced him to the Apostles – seeing what Saul could not see, seeing God's future in him; and, by building the bridges necessary to bring him into the full life of the body of Christ, making it possible for those hidden desires to come to fruition. Barnabas made it possible for Saul of Tarsus to grow into Paul the Apostle, still incoherent at times, and over-talkative, and short-tempered and all the rest of it, but nonetheless Saint Paul.

I do wonder incidentally whether, in the conventional translation from the Acts of the Apostles in our second lesson, Paul is let down ever so slightly gently. "Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker." [Acts 14.12b] The Greek might be less charitably rendered as "Paul they called Hermes because he could not stop talking!" Barnabas, whose magisterial silence comes through this reading, who reminded people of the great authoritative statues of the father of all gods in their temple, Barnabas had very little to

say; but he saw a lot, and seeing is at least as important as saying in our faith and our growing discipleship.

So one of the things we are celebrating today about Barnabas is what he was able to see. He could see the desire in Saul; he could see the possibility that he might after all be a man longing to grow into a fullness not yet imaginable. This tells us that part of the apostolic gift given to the Church is the freedom to see at that depth, to see into where people's deepest desires come from, to see in them a longing turning towards the light, deeply buried under all the many layers of illusion, selfishness and darkness where we normally leave our deepest desires.

Even Paul himself had something of this. *Paul looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed said, in a loud voice, 'Stand upright'.* [Acts 14.9] Paul and Barnabas, like Jesus himself, are interested in that deep longing, that hunger and thirst for healing, that is at the centre of our broken humanity. The apostolic word goes to that deep place, that desire to be healed, to be at one, to be reconciled.

This community, gathered under the patronage of St. Barnabas, this apostolic fellowship is called surely in prayer and witness to that kind of zeal and that kind of entry into the heart of a world which frequently does not know how hungry it is for healing. As we look around and listen at the moment, the world we see around us seems to be indeed a world that does not know what is good for it, does not know what to want. Listen to what people have been saying in this dismal election campaign, and you will on the whole have heard a great deal about what people don't want, but not very much about what they *do* want. As if people haven't got the courage, or the clarity or the freedom to speak from the depth of their being and say, "What we want is to be healed; what we want is to be reconciled; what we want is to grow in generosity and fidelity to one another, as a Church, as a society, as a world." We as Christians, we as ministers of the Gospel, can we go to that place and help our neighbours to find the courage and the clarity to say what they want, to speak out of that deep desire?

"But how do we know it is there?" we might say. "Look around and it doesn't seem to be what people want." We know it as an act of faith. We know it, because God has told us that he has placed his image in our hearts, the image of his Word, his Son; the image of the Son who looks to the Father with yearning and love; the Son who lives in peace and reconciliation and who, in his life among us on earth, makes real that peace and reconciliation as a promise for all of us. We trust that is how God is and that is how we are, and on the basis of that wild act of trust, against most of the evidence, we go on looking and listening and praying, seeking our prayer and our imagining of the world around to see through the tough carapace of violence and prejudice to that place in the heart where all God's children long for reconciliation and for healing; to accompany them in mind and heart as we pray, with all the risk that entails. Because to believe that about human beings is not particularly comfortable, let alone particularly obvious. It will cost us. It costs us in practical terms, for those who constantly put themselves at risk for the service of others. It costs us spiritually, because to be alongside the hurt and

confusion of the world eats into our own souls too. Yet, with Barnabas, we go on making the same stupid mistakes over and over again and trusting that the image of God is real in our neighbours. And God is particularly fond of that silly mistake and gives us the strength to go on making it, thank God.

Barnabas takes Saul by the hand and introduces him to the Apostles. Later on Barnabas introduces Paul to his young kinsman, Mark. Do you remember what a disaster that turned out to be? Barnabas continued to trust Mark when Paul stopped. Just as Barnabas had seen in Saul, that short-tempered, over-talkative, nervy man, the possible Apostle for the gentiles, Barnabas saw in his young cousin Mark, brash, shy, awkward, ambitious and, when it came to it, not very brave, one who would also be an Apostle and, tradition tells us, an Evangelist. That cost Barnabas his friendship with Paul, as we know. It was not without risk, not without cost.

So Barnabas's way of apostleship was not a comfortable one. It was not just about trying to see the best in everybody (which is all very well but doesn't get you very far) but seeing the deepest, the God-given depth, a level at which the image of God lives in us, and that stirring of the heart towards ultimate love of the Father.

Not what thou art, nor what thou hast been, beholdeth God with his merciful eyes, but what thou wouldst be. God looks at the possible future in each one of us, in each member of the human race, to be in service and prayer and imagining. "Look with God's eyes," – a frightening prospect, a bold phrase, and yet that is exactly what St Paul himself encourages us to do, having the mind of Christ.

This community of St Barnabas is, I say it in hushed tones, a community of the not entirely youthful, at least physically; a community of people who have perhaps not been thinking a great deal about what they desire or long for in recent years, but a community which *lives*, to the extent that its members can stir one another up in longing and desire in the name of God, a community that keeps alive that image of God in the heart and longing to grow in service and in gift, longing to grow that deep penetrating imagination that Barnabas shows.

Ministry, we all know, does not stop, surplices hung up at retirement, and that accompanying in prayer and imagination, that stirring and opening of the heart in growth that goes on to the day of our deaths, that is what is fostered and nurtured in a community like this. That is its preciousness, living in the spirit of Barnabas who sees and serves, who introduces people to a desire and longing they don't even yet know they have. It looks at the unpromising human material around, and the unpromising human material in the world, with the hope that comes from God's own perspective and reality.

What we give thanks for in this community is the nurturing of that apostolic and Christ-like spirit, that hope, that depth of desire, that willingness to go on growing not only towards death but beyond it; an endless expansion of the heart to the endless riches of God our maker, who sees not what we are and not what we have been but what we long to be.