

**Sermon 11.6.23**

**St. Barnabas**

**By Joy Dipple**

**Acts 11: 19-26**

**John 15: 12-17**

Because today is the Feast of St. Barnabas, I was quite intrigued to find out what I could about his ministry. We tend to concentrate on the apostles Peter and Paul when we look at the Acts of the Apostles, but Barnabas was vitally important in the story of the early church, so I invite you to join me in learning what we can about him.

He was originally called Joseph and was a Levite from Cyprus, who moved to Jerusalem, probably for educational reasons. I suspect he may have stayed with his wealthy aunt, a Mary, whose son was John Mark, and therefore a cousin to Barnabas. This Mark may be the writer of Mark's Gospel. Certainly Mary's home became a gathering place for the early Christians, and Barnabas became a prominent member of the early church in Jerusalem. He sold land he owned and gave the proceeds to the apostles, and was given the name Barnabas which means 'son of encouragement'. He was respected early on for his ministry of encouragement, and also his mentoring skills.

Those skills are so important, and I think they are really needed in today's world. We seem to exist in a toxic culture where we look for the faults in others, and there are endless witch hunts that take place in the celebrity world and the political sphere. Of course it's not advisable to encourage someone in skills they really don't possess. Someone who is tone deaf for example shouldn't be advised to join a choir! In my case it would be a total disaster to ask me to make cakes! We need to look for the potential talent that people really do possess. It needs genuine insight, and the willingness to point out abilities, and then to support someone in the way forward. When it comes to church ministry people don't usually put themselves forward, but need others to recognise their skills, and to encourage them. I know I was shocked many years ago when I was approached to do Readership training, but once the thought was there it wouldn't go away until I said yes.

Going back to Barnabas, one of the people he encouraged and mentored was St. Paul. Known as Saul at the time, he had tried to join the disciples in Jerusalem, but the believers were understandably afraid of him because of his past history of persecuting Christ's followers and his support for the stoning of Stephen. But Barnabas saw Saul's integrity and spoke to the apostles about Saul's Damascus Road experience, and how he had been preaching in

Damascus about Christ. Saul was then allowed to preach freely in Jerusalem, until a group of Jews tried to kill him, and he was sent to Tarsus.

Now we move forward to today's reading. Evangelism was beginning to take place amongst the Greeks in Antioch and many people had become believers. It was the policy of the church in Jerusalem to send people out to check on new ministries that had come to their attention, and Barnabas was chosen to go and evaluate what was happening. What he saw really impressed him and he again used his gift of encouragement to support the new believers. We are told that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. He saw that the growing church in Antioch needed extra support, and as a result he went to Tarsus and brought Saul back with him. Without Barnabas Saul may not have become such a prominent evangelist to the Gentiles. Under the mentoring of Barnabas his ministry grew and many people were taught about the faith. We are also told that Christ's followers were first called Christians at Antioch.

Following this, Saul, now beginning to be known as Paul, and Barnabas began their first powerful missionary journey. Under Barnabas's mentoring Paul was now a formidable evangelist, and their journey included many miraculous signs and wonders.

The growth of the Gentile churches now raised another problem which was about how the new Gentile Christians were to live their lives. Paul and Barnabas were insistent that they shouldn't be forced to take on Jewish customs such as circumcision, and they travelled to Jerusalem to argue their case against the Pharisaic wing of the believers; so Barnabas, along with Paul, was instrumental in resolving this situation, and enabling the Gentile believers just to follow moral guidelines. A compromise had been reached that preserved the Christian community.

During their first missionary journey Mark had begun travelling with them, but left part way through, and now Paul was unwilling to take Mark with them on another journey. It led to a sharp exchange between him and Barnabas, and the parting of the ways for the moment. Barnabas now mentored Mark and took him with him to Cyprus, whilst Paul went to Syria and Cilicia with Silas. However, the church continued to grow, and bad feelings were restored. Mark, under Barnabas's mentorship, would again be highly regarded by Paul.

It is significant that Barnabas's qualities were highlighted in the Acts of the Apostles. He epitomised the characteristics spoken of in our Gospel reading, but is particularly known for his insight and being a great encourager of the gifts in others. He looked for the good in other people, that others may have overlooked.

The churches grew but there was always opposition and many disciples endured martyrdom. We aren't exactly sure what happened to Barnabas, but it seems that he may have been tortured to death at Salamis, Cyprus; and that Mark buried him there in about AD 60.

Life was tough, and it still is for believers around the world; but as Christians we should always emulate Barnabas and never give up looking for the good in others, and encouraging the gifts that God has given to each one of us.