

Alresford St John: St Barnabas June 11th 2021

Acts 4.36: There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph to whom the Apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”)

Some members of this church have been with us to Cyprus, to the town of Salamis where Paul and Barnabas visited and preached the Gospel. There is a church there and a shrine which contains the remains of St Barnabas. The story is that someone had a dream that if they dug in a certain place they would find the remains of St Barnabas. They did and they did! Whether you can trust such stories is another matter, but we know he came from Cyprus and that Salamis was the first place in Cyprus to hear the Christian Gospel, so it is appropriate that he is buried there.

We first hear of Barnabas when he sells a field and gives the money to the Apostles to be shared out. We hear of him again when Paul, after his conversion, wants to meet the Apostles. The Apostles, understandably, are nervous about meeting this former persecutor. It is Barnabas who goes and meets Paul and brings him in to meet the Apostles. It is again Barnabas who, having been sent to help the church at Antioch on the Orontes goes and collects Paul and brings him to Antioch to help. There they teach together, and it is the two of them who are sent to Jerusalem with a gift of money from the Antioch church as famine looms large on the horizon. Finally, the Holy Spirit asks the church to set aside Paul and Barnabas and they start their missionary career by going to Cyprus, along with John Mark. They next go to what is now the Turkish mainland, to the other Antioch (Pisidian), and then to Iconium, Derbe and Lystra before returning home. They go together to the great church council in Jerusalem at which Paul's work with Gentile Christians is recognised. Sadly, when Paul wants to return to Cyprus to encourage people there Barnabas wants to take John Mark – but Paul refuses because he had left them on their first journey and Paul thought he was unreliable. Barnabas stood up for John Mark and Barnabas and Paul never worked together again, though John Mark did become part of Paul's circle in later days.

I want to note three things about Barnabas that these passages from the Acts of the Apostles teach us. And the first of these is that Barnabas notices people and is a judge of character. He knows that the Apostles need to meet Paul. He knows that Paul is going to be exactly the right man for the job at Antioch so he goes off and fetches him. But he also sees in John Mark something that Paul does not see for quite a time. He, too, will be the right man to work with Barnabas.

Secondly, Barnabas was someone who took risks. I have already mentioned the way he brought Paul to meet the Apostles. He might have been walking into a trap. But Barnabas was also ready to go with Paul to Cyprus to preach the Gospel. The one place you have to be really brave to preach the Gospel is on your own home patch – “a prophet is never honoured in his own country” says Jesus. And Barnabas again showed courage when he stood up for John Mark. Paul only did black and white and was not an easy man to disagree with. Barnabas had courage.

Thirdly, Barnabas was generous. We know that he sold his field and brought the money to the Apostles. It is that same generosity of spirit that leads Barnabas to encourage people, to believe in Paul and then John Mark and trust himself to them.

Today I want to ask you if you have ever thought you should be encouraging people more in your lives? One of the reasons that we meet together for worship and prayer together is that each one of us needs encouragement at some point in our lives. We sometimes think that “fellowship” is having fish and chips together. It is more profound than that. It is about encouraging one another in the faith. Don't leave it to the Parish Priest – minister to one another through encouragement. And then, even more importantly. There is the world about us. How many young people, known to us or unknown, need encouragement now that Covid 19 has damaged their exam process and possibly ruined their careers? They need Barnabas people in their lives. They may be family, they may be strangers: but this is something vital we can all do – encourage them. But, like Barnabas we shall need to notice them, we shall need to be courageous (not scared of making fools of ourselves) and we must be generous. Today asks us – are you needed to encourage others?