

“Are You A Barnabas??”

Acts 11:19-30

The voice from heaven spoke to me (the Apostle Peter) again, “When God says that something can be used for food, don’t say it isn’t fit to eat.” This happened three times before it was all taken back into heaven.

Suddenly three men from Caesarea stood in front of the house where I was staying. The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry. Then six of the Lord’s followers went with me to the home of a man who told us that an angel had appeared to him. The angel had ordered him to send to Joppa for someone named Simon Peter. Then Peter would tell him how he and everyone in his house could be saved.

After I started speaking, the Holy Spirit was given to them, just as the Spirit had been given to us at the beginning. I remembered that the Lord had said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” God gave those Gentiles the same gift that he gave us when we put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So how could I have gone against God?

When they heard Peter say this, they stopped arguing and started praising God. They said, “God has now let Gentiles turn to him, and he has given life to them!”

The Church in Antioch

Some of the Lord’s followers had been scattered because of the terrible trouble that started when Stephen was killed. They went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, but they told the message only to the Jews.

Some of the followers from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and started telling Gentiles the good news about the Lord Jesus [*“Gentiles”: This translates a Greek word that may mean “people who speak Greek” or “people who live as Greeks do.” Here the word seems to mean “people who are not Jews.” Some manuscripts have “Greeks,” which also seems to mean “people who are not Jews.”*]. The Lord’s power was with them, and many people turned to the Lord and put their faith in him. News of what was happening reached the church in Jerusalem. Then they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When Barnabas got there and saw what God had been kind enough to do for them, he was very glad. So he begged them to remain faithful to the Lord with all their hearts. Barnabas was a good man of great faith, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Many more people turned to the Lord.

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. 26 He found Saul and brought him to Antioch, where they met with the church for a whole year and taught many of its people. There in Antioch the Lord’s followers were first called Christians.

During this time some prophets from Jerusalem came to Antioch. One of them was Agabus. Then with the help of the Spirit, he told that there would be a terrible famine everywhere in the world. And it happened when Claudius was Emperor [A.D. 41-54]. The followers in Antioch decided to send

whatever help they could to the followers in Judea. So they had Barnabas and Saul take their gifts to the church leaders in Jerusalem.

Our patronal festival gives us another chance to think about the gift of the name of our lovely church. When PCC gets to discuss the normal everyday human issues that regularly accompany church life – and in combination they can sometimes weigh you down (if I'm honest) I get encouragement from what the New Testament tells us about St. B. We just read from Acts 11 – here are another few verses from earlier on in Acts 4 – and I think you'd agree that this is something worth aspiring to:

All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great blessing was upon them all. There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.

For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles

Quite often & undeservedly just seen as plain old 'Barnie' (Paul's side-kick or assistant) what we have is the picture of a truly Christian man who simply followed the example of Jesus. If we dig just for a moment to see what's said about Barnabas, we see a wonderful Christian who helped spread the gospel by being such a powerful encourager (& boy do we need those, especially at the moment!).

His real name was Joseph – the Levite – someone who gave of himself and what he had with generosity. And being a Levite, like Paul, he'd have been part of the Jewish religious system... and (like Paul) for him to break away from that must've been a huge step!

If we skip ahead to Acts 9 (that famous chapter that tells the amazing story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus) we see the influence of Barnabas. Keep in mind that Saul (who only became known later as Paul) was a much feared enemy of the new Christian Church. He was trying his hardest to wipe it out. But then he had a personal encounter with Jesus that utterly transformed him. So it wasn't surprising that the Jews didn't like him much because he was a traitor, and they planned to kill him. When Saul discovered this, the Christians helped him escape safely from Damascus and he ended up going to Jerusalem... where many of the leaders of the Christian Church were located. But then when this new disciple tried to meet with them, there was quite a

reaction. We're told: "*they were all afraid of him, and didn't believe that he really was a disciple.*"

Can you blame them?? They thought it was just a trick. So nobody would have anything to do with Paul... except one man.... Barnabas. Here's what we're told in verse 27:

Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus.

Good old Barnabas - willing to risk his own safety and popularity by believing in ... and befriending... Saul – saying positive things about him, when others wouldn't touch him with the proverbial barge-pole.

Barnabas knew God was on the side of those whose faces don't fit – out there on the margins – and aren't there so many people in our community who would be afraid to come and worship with us...for fear of being rejected? They need friends like Barnabas who are willing to reach out to them and introduce them to the rest of the believers. It was risky for Barnabas to do it, and it may be risky for us too – but what a legacy we've been given.

But if you want to know what the real driving force behind Barnabas was, it's in our reading from chapter 11. The good news of Jesus had reached a town called Antioch and a new Christian Church had started up there. They needed someone to teach them. So who was sent to them? Barnabas! And what did he do when he got there? He exhorted, encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion – *for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.* And there were amazing results. Did they build a nice big impressive church? No, because that's not what it was all about. No...“a great many people were brought to the Lord.” Imagine how much the Christian Church would grow today if more of us would be willing to encourage people in a relationship with the Lord the way Barnabas did!

And then what does he do next?...sit back and bask in the glow of his success? No. he knew it was the power of the Holy Spirit working through him that had caused all this to happen, *not* his own efforts. So rather than pat himself on the back, Barnabas went and got some help – no one-man show here (they call it 'collaborative ministry now!)... He went to Tarsus to find Saul the tentmaker... now better known as *Paul*. And Paul would become his missionary companion. I suspect that Barnabas was the one who recognized Paul's great potential – and what an impact they

had together.. As you read through the account in Chapters 12 & 13 you notice that the team is always listed as Barnabas and Paul...that is.... until chapter 13 verse 42. All of a sudden the team becomes known as Paul and Barnabas. Perhaps because Paul was beginning to show how powerfully he could preach the gospel. But it probably tells us something very important about Barnabas too. He didn't mind not being in the limelight or playing second fiddle – even though he was the one who had encouraged Paul in the first place when no-one wanted to know. All Barnabas seemed to care about was that the gospel was being shared with as many people as possible.

There' are just two more incidents concerning Barnabas that I want us to notice: one good and one not so!. The first is chapter 15 if you want to look it up later. Paul & Barnabas had been very active as a missionary team – and they were getting ready to go out again. This time Barnabas wanted to take along a young helper named John Mark. But Paul refused. Evidently John Mark had bailed out on them on a previous missionary journey. Nobody knows for sure why this happened, but Paul figured they had lots of work to do and they needed helpers who would stay totally committed. Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance. Paul didn't; he obviously thought the mission was too important to risk another problem. But once again, we see Barnabas being willing to reach out to someone who needed a friend to believe in him; willing to believe John Mark had changed. And Barnabas was so passionate about this that it caused a major rift between Paul and him. They became so deeply divided over this issue that they decided to split up and go their separate ways. Paul took a man named Silas with him to Syria. And Barnabas took John Mark and went to Cyprus again.

Now we mustn't think for a minute that this was a trivial thing that Barnabas had done – but the encouragement that he gave to that young man paid off. John Mark evidently proved that he WAS a reliable helper while on his missionary journeys with Barnabas. How do we know that? Well, years later John Mark became one of Paul's closest helpers and friends. In Colossians 4:10, Paul says that Mark was helping him while he was in prison. And listen to what Paul then writes about Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11, *"Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."* Ha! Told ya so Paul! But even more important than helping Paul out was that John Mark is probably none other than the one who wrote the gospel!

Now...so we don't idolize anyone – and Dai Woolbridge (if you remember the Tentmaker) brought this out about Paul being flawed with his own 'thorn in the flesh'- in Paul's letter to the

Galatians where they were getting hung up about keeping the Jewish rules, he tells the Christians there:

...when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line. Here's the situation. Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews. But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That's how fearful he was of the conservative Jewish clique that's been pushing the old system of circumcision. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the Antioch church joined in that hypocrisy so that even Barnabas was swept along in the charade.

Every year at this time of our Patronal festival I get a fresh sense of the privilege of belonging to this Parish Church and to have been given such a legacy – but I'm also encouraged (because you all know this about me!!) that Barnabas had feet of clay like Paul and like the rest of us. Perhaps *his* default position was a bit legalistic and traditionalist – and although he stuck his neck out with people - maybe when it came to church practice he was more cautious; frightened of standing against the stream.

Ah but when he allowed the Holy Spirit to be in charge, just look at what was accomplished for his Lord as Barnabas encouraged people and befriended them – recognizing their gifts and ministries.

Oh yes (one final thing) - remember Barnabas's real name – Joseph? The name actually means “exalted one.” Perhaps that was an apt description of Barnabas *before* the Holy Spirit got hold of him. But once he learned what Jesus had done for him he was different.

Let's let the Lord continue to work his change in all of us – in this community, at this time, with these people - for God's glory and his reputation. **Amen.**