

Barnabas, son of encouragement

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Sunday 9 June 2013 — Barnabas, apostle and martyr
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Job 29.11-16; Psalm 146; Acts 11.19-30, 13.1-3; Matthew 10.7-13.

In 1755, Admiral John Byng commanded a British fleet in a fight with a French fleet off the coast of Minorca in the Mediterranean. The French force was superior, the battle was inconclusive, and Admiral Byng was forced to withdraw. There was public outrage in Britain and the government needed a scapegoat. Byng was court-martialled and shot.

Frenchman Voltaire famously wrote four years later that the English needed to kill an admiral from time-to-time “to encourage the others.”

I trust that such encouragement will not be necessary for preachers at St Philip's! It certainly wasn't necessary for Saint Barnabas. St Barnabas, whom we celebrate today, is known in scripture as the ‘son of encouragement’. Next Tuesday, the 11th, is his feast day—the anniversary of his martyrdom at Salamis, Cyprus, in the year 61.

Acts chapter 4 tells of a Levite, a native of Cyprus, named Joseph. When Joseph sold land he owned and gave the money to the apostles in Jerusalem, they gave him a new name: Barnabas, roughly meaning ‘son of consolation’ or ‘son of encouragement’.

To encourage, mean to support or help—not just say pretty thing; an encouraging action inspires and motivates.

As our vision for 2013, at St Philip's we are challenging ourselves to be and become a place where everyone experiences belonging and nurture. During this year, as we learn more about some of the earliest saints, we're focusing on what each once can teach about nurture.

Most of you have seen me wearing this medal before: it's a medal of Saint Benedict and signifies that I am an oblate, a lay associate, of the Benedictine Abbey at Jamberoo. When one becomes an oblate, one is asked to choose an oblate name—often a saint's name—in a similar manner to nuns and monks who take a new ‘name in religion’, as its called, when they make their solemn profession. I chose ‘Barnabas’ because I identify with the way he worked to nurture and encourage others in the faith.

When Barnabas appears in the Book of Acts, we find him caring and encouraging through bold, sacrificial action. The story begins in Acts chapter 4. The Jerusalem believers described there held their possessions in common. Those who owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles. Money was given to those in need; there was not a needy person among them, we're told. Barnabas also sold land and contributed the proceeds.

My giving is not as sacrificial as that of Barnabas! But none of us can avoid that caring for each other involves, among other things, giving money and using our money and property to help, serve and encourage. It's no use to tell a hungry woman to be encouraged; better to feed her. It doesn't help a shivering man to hear kind words; he needs warm clothes. Barnabas and others acted, the church was encouraged and people's needs were met.

Barnabas was born a Levite, of the tribe originally set aside for service in God's house. I love God's house. A practical aspect of our nurture of others in the faith is to help each other understand what's going on in this place and wherever we gather, help each other to take part fully and with understanding and joy.

We next read about Barnabas in chapter 9. Saul, who had previously persecuted the church, was radically changed on his Damascus journey and now believed in Jesus. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem were understandably nervous and wary of Saul. They met with Saul only because Barnabas vouched for him. We don't know why Barnabas did this, but there may have been no "apostle Paul" if he hadn't.

Barnabas believed in the power of the Gospel for change. His sponsorship of Paul is an example of openness, bringing the new convert into the fellowship of believers. It's a joy to help newcomers become welcome and connected. Once again, this is caring and nurturing, through simple but faith-filled action.

Now we come to today's reading from Acts, chapters 11 and 13. When the apostles heard of the growth of the church in Antioch—among both Jews and non-Jews—they sent Barnabas to check on things and create a connection between the new believers and the Jerusalem leadership.

Barnabas chose not to work alone; he sought out Paul to assist him. They worked together for a full year. (Acts 11:25, 26) Barnabas made an opportunity for Paul's gifts and leadership potential to flourish. It was not enough that Saul—now called Paul—was accepted in the church; it was time to put him to work. Barnabas was a church builder; a team worker, and a collaborator in ministry. He saw how to nurture and develop Paul's ministry and he acted on what he could see.

In Antioch and elsewhere in the early church, the Jewish Christians disagreed with each other about whether and to what extent the Gentile believers needed to conform to the Jewish laws. There was a special gathering of leaders in Jerusalem to discuss the question—known to history as the Council of Jerusalem. Barnabas and Paul convinced the leaders that Gentiles, non-Jews, should be allowed into the Christian community without circumcision or adherence to Jewish dietary laws. (Acts 15; Galatians 2)

Barnabas knew that the church's mission is universal. He brought together Greek-speaking converts and believers of Jewish origin. He worked in what today we call 'cross-cultural ministry'—in evangelism and church building. Barnabas knew what was the right and godly thing to do to bless the church and the Gentile believers. So he did something about it—travelled to Jerusalem with Paul to submit their proposal.

Barnabas and Paul always respected each other, but they didn't always agree. John Mark, a young disciple, had disappointed Paul, and Paul did not want to take him on their next journey. Barnabas disagreed with Paul and wanted to give John Mark a second chance. The disagreement was so strong that Paul and Barnabas separated. Paul wanted to get on with the job of evangelism and church planting, with nothing in the way.

To Barnabas, to teach and mentor the young man, John Mark, was also important. This too, is nurture through action—teaching others in practical ways and leading by example. It took courage for Barnabas to defy Paul and give the young disciple another chance to grow in ministry.

Barnabas is named as an apostle. (Acts 14:14) Nevertheless, with time, Paul became more prominent than Barnabas; instead of "Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:30; 12:25; 13:2, 7) we begin to read of "Paul and Barnabas". (Acts 13:43, 46, 50; 14:20; 15:2, 22, 35) I have seen people I have helped as new and young Christians grow into positions of leadership where I have been under their authority. I have found this not a humiliation but a joy.

Barnabas could have chosen to cling to his seniority. Instead, he did as he had done from the beginning. He saw a need and then did whatever it took. This time, the nurturing way was

simply to be humble, recognising that God was working powerfully through another's ministry.

We've quickly looked at examples of the work of Barnabas the Apostle. We can see that he nurtured other believers and cared for the church through encouraging action. Eventually it was to cost him his life.

Barnabas nurtured the work of others by humbly acknowledging what God was doing in them. Barnabas saw possibilities that others missed. Barnabas took action, with grace, with care, and with encouragement. May we do the same.