

Reflection on St Barnabas the Apostle by David Kennedy

June 11 is St Barnabas' Day in our Church calendar. He is one of my favourite saints. What do we know about him? Well, he was from Cyprus and he was a Levite – that means he belonged to the tribe of Levi, one of the 12 Tribes of Israel. Historically, the Levites had been assistants at the Jerusalem Temple. His name was Joseph, but the Apostles gave him a new name *Barnabas*, which, we are told, means 'Son of Encouragement'. St Luke describes him as 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith'. He was certainly generous – in order to assist the poorer members of this new Christian community, Barnabas sold a field he owned and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. He also showed great generosity of spirit. When the Apostles heard that Gentiles were believing in Jesus in Antich, they sent Barnabas to investigate. When he arrived, we are told 'he saw the grace of God and rejoiced'. He welcomed this new spreading of the Gospel. When the savage persecutor of the Church, Saul of Tarsus, declared that he was now a Christian, many were wary. Was this a sham conversion? Was it a ploy so that Saul could infiltrate the Church and then arrest those who followed Jesus? Well, it was Barnabas who took Saul by the arm and introduced him to the Apostles as a Christian brother. Saul, of course, also changed his name to Paul and became the great Apostle to the Gentiles. But even here Barnabas shows his humility. You see, he and Paul teamed up to begin their great missionary endeavour to take the gospel to new places. At first, this dynamic duo were described as *Barnabas and Saul* but later, it switched to *Paul and Barnabas*. Barnabas recognised that a greater charism or gift of the Spirit had been given to Paul, so he was prepared to become number two rather than number one. It's not that Paul and Barnabas always agreed eye to eye. They had a great fall out over John Mark, Barnabas' nephew and writer of St Mark's Gospel. Mark got cold feet on the first missionary journey. But when they decided to start the second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take Mark again but Paul would none of it. So they separated. But you know, Barnabas wanted to give Mark a second chance. He was generous to someone who had failed first time. It's interesting that later in 2 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy to bring Mark with him when Timothy next visited Paul, because he said, 'he is useful to me in my ministry'. Mark had proved his worth and Barnabas enabled that.

So, it seems that Barnabas was a great person to have around – positive, generous in substance and generous in spirit, a true son of encouragement, a good man, full of faith.

Encouragement is so important. You may well remember teachers who encouraged you, who believed in you, who invested in you. You may also remember teachers who made you feel like rubbish, as if you were worth little. You may have known employers who could see in you perhaps something you couldn't see in yourself, but they encouraged you and helped to develop your gifts. You may have had clergy who encouraged you in faith, who patiently answered your questions, and enabled you to grow in faith and in your identity as a Christian. We never forget them, because without them we wouldn't be the people we are. We thrive on encouragement. It brightens the day and puts a spring in our step.

What's the opposite of a 'son of encouragement'? Well, it's someone who is a cold-water pourer; you know the type, people who believe nothing can ever change, or whose mantra is – 'It's no good doing that, we tried it once and it didn't work'. Or people who simply tell you what they don't like, but who never ever say that something was good or godly or helpful. Some Christians seem devoid of enthusiasm or even a smile. They just seem miserable and they can suck the life out of you.

Thank God therefore for people like Barnabas. A Christian writer, T. R. Glover, once said this – 'All other faults or deficiencies Christ could tolerate, but he could have neither part nor lot with people devoid of enthusiasm'. We might say, 'devoid of encouragement'. May we, like Barnabas, encourage each other in faith and in our desire to carry forward the work of the Church. May we see potential, and nourish it; may we see God's grace at work and rejoice in it, may we show the generosity of spirit that builds up rather than flattens, that enthuses rather than pours cold water. May we be sons and daughters of encouragement.