



Sermon for the Feast of Barnabas the Apostle

Lord, on this day of the feast of Barnabas the Apostle, may we be inspired by his example, his energy, his generosity, and his loyalty to you, risen Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

As many of you probably know, I'm originally from Paris and the suburbs of Paris. Now Paris is not a huge capital city, it's much smaller than London, but it's definitely a place where you can live very anonymously. You're not likely to bump into anyone you know. So imagine the contrast when I settled down in Cambridge thirty years ago. Cambridge is at the same time large enough that you have some anonymity, but small enough that you will bump into someone you know any day of the week, especially if you know some of the clergy there.

One thing I immediately loved about Cambridge was how international it feels, especially in the spring and summer, when in the space of a few minutes, you can hear at least ten different languages being spoken. It's a city where many cultures meet, mingle, study, and work together.

Well, in the ancient world, Antioch, functioned in a similar way, except it was even more exciting and thriving. Antioch was one of these great crossroads of culture and trade. I am talking of Antioch in Syria, not to be confused with Antioch in Pisidia, where Paul and his friends found themselves in chapter 13 of the Acts of the Apostles. In our story today, we are in Antioch, Syria, on the river Orontes, north of Jerusalem.

Imagine a great, crowded, cosmopolitan city, at the confluence of ancient roads and shipping lanes, where most people who travelled would regularly bump into each other and share news from their respective cities.

It is there, in this great Syrian city, that the word 'Christian' first came into use.

Now the word 'Christian' was just a nickname, but it was indicative of what people understood about the followers of Jesus. In Antioch, you would hear every language under the sun, but the one that everyone shared was Greek. And 'Christ' was the Greek word for 'Messiah', the anointed one, God's anointed king - the followers of Jesus were thinking and speaking in such a way that they were thought of as 'the king's people', Christians, people of the one in whom God's purposes are brought to fulfilment.

Also in Antioch, there was a brilliant teacher and preacher, one who made sure the ways of Christ were widely taught and shared among population and travellers: Paul. And the reason Paul found himself in Antioch was Barnabas.

It was Barnabas who introduced Paul to the Twelve in the first place – not an easy task, since Paul, or Saul as he was originally known, had been a relentless persecutor of Christian folk – and it was Barnabas who went to Tarsus, Paul’s city of origin, sought him out, and brought him to Antioch to teach the crowds of believers and non-believers. He must have spotted that Paul was an exceptional teacher and preacher, and he must have wanted to see his gifts used to the full. He must have thought the people needed the *best* possible teacher. And how right he was!

There’s a little anecdote in the Book of Acts. Barnabas and Paul travelled far and wide together. And one day, their travels took them to the city of Lystra, in Turkey. There, they met lots of people and proclaimed the good news of Jesus. And the people gave them nicknames. Barnabas they called ‘Zeus’, and Paul they called ‘Hermes’! That’s probably because Barnabas had an imposing appearance, and for sure because Paul was the chief speaker.

But I want to think that Barnabas too was eloquent. Without him and his loyalty to the apostles, Paul would not have become part of their group, and he might not have played the huge part he played in building the church.

And Barnabas has much to teach us in terms of loyalty to Christ too. The way Luke writes about him is not only moving, but also significant theologically. Luke says: ‘Barnabas came and *saw the grace of God*, and he was glad, for he was a good man, full of the holy spirit and faith.’ In other words, when he arrived in Antioch, what Barnabas saw was not just a motley group of people being taught about Jesus into some random house, but *God’s grace at work*.

Where do *we* see God’s grace at work in our world today?

It took Barnabas humility and faith to see God’s grace at work in Antioch. But Luke tells us he was *full of the Holy Spirit and faith*: Barnabas walked the way of Christ, he was simple in heart, and rich in spirit; he did not exalt himself, but was humble before God; he loved people more than himself and worked tirelessly to attend to the widow and the orphan, to include the excluded, to support the needy, the oppressed, and the afflicted. And if someone had asked him why he did all those things, he would have replied ‘I just did what needed to be done to bring people to Jesus.’

Every time *we* take a step on the way of Christ, we act like Barnabas.

When Barnabas first joined the apostles, he was known as Joseph, a levite from Cyprus, and he had some land that he owned. He sold some of his fields and brought the proceeds to the Twelve for the relief of the poor and the work of the community. That’s because the first Christians saw themselves as the ‘covenant community’ in whom God’s promises were coming true, and they believed that God had established this ‘new covenant’ through Jesus of Nazareth. Sharing wealth, food, and means was vital for the work of the community.

Every time *we* share possessions, wealth, food, effort, work, we act like the first followers of Jesus and we mirror his love, his compassion, his generosity.

Sharing is important for the work of the church, but what matters far more is, of course, that the church should always be open to the cry of the poor, from whatever quarter it comes, and should always be ready to respond by sending its best help.

Like the first 'Christians', we are not just 'the king's people'. The 'king' was Jesus himself. And for that reason, we are to be known as people who are committed at the deepest level to giving ourselves in love to one another and to all in need. Like Barnabas, a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

So let us pray.

Almighty God,
who called Barnabas to do your work of caring, of supporting and encouraging others:
give us humble hearts,
that we may centre our lives on you,
that we may see your grace at work, in the world and in our local community;
give us generous hearts,
that we may serve others in a spirit of joy and thanksgiving;
that we may encourage others who seek you and need your presence in their lives;
and give us trusting hearts,
that we may always put our hope in you, loving Father, almighty Saviour, comforting Spirit.

Amen

(Sermon inspired by Tom Wright – Acts for Everyone)