

DIOCESAN SYNOD JUNE 2022

I don't know which genre of literature you dislike the most, but mine is the autobiography. With some notable exceptions, too many autobiographies are self-serving, settling old scores and telling half-truths. One of the things I love about scripture is its scepticism, a willingness to tell it as it is. Few come out of this unblemished. Daniel, perhaps? One who nearly does is Barnabas, whose feast day it is today.

Nearly because, at least on St Paul's testimony in Galatians, the dispute over whether Gentile converts should be circumcised and keep Jewish law produced a faction so bullishly hard-line that 'even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy' (brackets: bear in mind that Galatians is kind of Paul's autobiography).

And then there is the very public spat with Paul over whether John Mark should join them on a missionary journey where Luke records: *The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company*. That's fascinating on two counts. One, that the guy who wrote the anthem to love in 1 Corinthians 13 completely lost it and two, figuring out God's guidance proved difficult even in a Church rocking and rolling with the power of the Holy Spirit. Who'd have guessed that two Christians could ever fall out with each other, eh?

But these aside, Barnabas had an impeccable CV and it speaks to us as we seek to live out the marks of mission in a Rochester kind of way. It's lazy to sum up another person in one word, given how complex everyone is, but it's noticeable how some words attach to people like sticky sellotape. Ask anyone who knows Barnabas' story and that word will be 'encourager'. Encouragement is needed in such industrial quantities today and it helps to define everyday faith. Our culture is competitive and attritional. We view other people as rivals and bolster our brittle self-esteem by elevating ourselves over them. Encouragement is so rare, that people often wonder what lies behind it. Do they want something from me? Are they flirting with me? Market values have leaked into human relationships in ways that poison, because friends and colleagues should be there to co-operate with, not to compete with.

As we re-assess our everyday faith, something Nick is going to speak about shortly, the wish to be an encourager should be high on the list. It's said that being affirmed by another is like Teflon. The words just don't stick. But being criticised by someone is like Velcro. We just can't prize it off. The brain science even shows this. We need to give far more attention to the good things said to us than the bad, but we just don't hear enough of them. As changes go, being an encourager one of the simplest and cheapest ones to make. Funny then, that we often struggle to make it.

Barnabas was an evangelist, accompanying Paul on world-changing journeys, not least in sharing the Gospel on his homeland of Cyprus. Given the risks Paul routinely took, this exposed Barnabas to potential harm, but he did not shrink from it. And he was an astute deployer of ministers. When it becomes clear how well the city of Antioch was responding the news about Jesus, Barnabas doesn't stay put to bask in this or claim it for himself. He hotfoots it to Tarsus,

where Paul looks to be on extended ministerial study leave, to get him to Antioch where he is needed.

And he also had a strong grip of what we might call community engagement. For him, social concern was a function of mission. The prophet Agabus, who in a different story from Acts messed up his prediction of what would happen to Paul if he visited Jerusalem, nailed the prophecy of a widespread famine which the disciples were able to pre-empt. Using Barnabas and Paul, relief was brought to the Jesus followers in Judea, helping to cement the new and precarious relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

There was lingering distrust between the two communities, especially that sense the Gentile Christians were less than real Christians because they didn't believe things or do things the way Jewish Christians did. This inspired act of generosity glued the communities together and set an example to the Church ever since when it has felt and looked divided: that money freely given goes a long way to preserving the witness and integrity of the wider Church.

Barnabas' role coheres with an earlier instance in his life. When Saul converted to Christ and became known as Paul, he left behind a job description of making life as perilous as possible for those who followed Jesus. The believers in Jerusalem were sceptical of Paul. His new allegiance felt as plausible as Gerry Adams joining the DUP in 1985. Was Paul's conversion real or just a ruse to infiltrate their number the better to dispose of them? Paul could have wasted many months trying to establish his credibility but for the trusting approach of Barnabas, who vouched for his integrity with those who were suspicious of Paul's motives. We are having vigorous and necessary debates today about how willing we should be to trust others. Here, Barnabas seems to show the priority of trust when there is evidence of God at work. As the research shows, the more responsibly trusting a society is, the happier it is.

Barnabas was highly relational, an includer of others, whether that be the rogue Saul or the new Gentile converts. If Barnabas were alive today, I wonder who he would be looking to put in the frame? It's a truism that decisions are made by those who turn up. Yet too often in life, decisions are made by those who turn up in favour of those who turn up. Maybe in the Church we need to turn this on its head, so decisions are made by those who turn up in favour of those who haven't turned up.

Four groups who haven't turned up that come to mind are: young people, housebound people, poorer people and all those who do not know the love of God in Christ. Those first three cohorts – the young, the housebound and the poor – have disproportionately lost out in the pandemic and stand to lose more in the cost of living crisis. What does good news mean for them? Young people have presented to this Synod recently, but their voice remains faint because it still comes from the margins. Towards the end of today's Synod, Julia will speak to the work of Anna chaplains, so many of whom minister to those who do not leave their homes anymore. And the Church of England both nationally and locally, if I can generalise, is still the preserve of the wealthy and articulate. The

Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus 'to bring good news to the poor'. So, what should this look like in Kent, Medway and South-East London?

In addressing the issue of climate change, the United Arab Emirates has created a 'Ministry of Cabinet Affairs and the Future'. Hungary has an 'Ombudsman for Future Generations'. Neither nation is exactly a paragon of human rights, but they have identified people outside the room who should figuratively be in the room when decisions are made. The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 in Wales enshrines into law that the well-being of the current and future people of Wales is explicitly the core purpose of the Welsh government.

Who do we want to bring figuratively into the room when we make decisions? If we decided to do this with a cohort of our choosing, it would make a tangible difference, freeing up our imagination in a way that committee meetings usually don't. It would release our inner Barnabas.

In our reading from John 15, Jesus said: *I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.* I'm slow on the uptake over some things, and these words of Jesus are a good example. It was only a few months ago that the penny dropped for me. Fruit does not last. By definition it goes off really quickly. So this spiritual fruit must be of a different order. Imagine fruit that never went off, that remained forever ripe, sweet and chewy. This is the fruit we grow.

And its Barnabas textured seed bed is encouragement, concern for others, both spiritual and social, and a desire to bring in from the cold all who have been left outside when decision making is skewed in favour of those present.

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