

I well recall the first time I invoked the aid of St. Barnabas. It was early in 1981. I was a final year student at St. Stephen's House and in those days seminarians were required to preach an assessed sermon outside the college. St. Barnabas, Jericho was my allocated field of combat. As I recall Fr. Andrew Louth presided at the mass and, forming a line across the rear of the congregation were my tutor, Fr. John Muddiman and a cohort of 'Staggers' homiletical hortators, with score cards at the ready. I was quaking in my boots!

Invoking the aid of the saints became for me, as it has for so many, a normal thing to do. Of course we have frequent recourse to blessed Mary, source of our joy and consolation – yet by no means being hindered from approaching the divine fruit of her womb, our blessed Lord. However there is an enormous sense of comfort and encouragement to be had within the great communion of saints, among whom there are those with whom we empathise in particular ways because it seems the Church has given them specific areas of care for their earthly sisters and brothers.

A wonderfully irreverent archdeacon colleague once commented that in one way and one way only was joining the bishop's staff like being made a saint: the moment you get the job, you are given a dozen others as well! So it is that I often find myself in conversation with St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. St. Antony of Padua, were he not a saint, would be utterly fed up with me and my car keys by now. And St. Barnabas has not escaped for he now has special care for peacemakers and reconcilers; he will also add his prayers to those of farmers who fear that hailstorms will ruin their crops.

However, there is a cautionary note to be sounded as we call upon the saints for their prayers and aid because, as with any other relationship, the saints are not just there for when we want something. After all what would we – what do we – think of the relative who only ever gets in touch when they want something.

So we guard against treating our sainted companions in that way by keeping the feast with them. We not only keep their memory alive, we celebrate the relationship we have with them in the community of saints; we remind ourselves of our unity with them. They need no such reminder.

Thus, on this eve of St. Barnabas we make ἀναμνησις with him – more than just the implied 'not ever forgetting' but also somehow a making present of the relationship we have with him. In our conversation with St. Barnabas today we do more than keep the memory; we do more than ask for help; we do more than re-affirm the relationship; . . . we listen. He has much to teach us if we will but hear. It is as T.S. Eliot wrote,

“And what the dead had no speech for when living they can tell you, being dead. The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living”

Barnabas, man of Cyprus, Levite and Bishop, you have long had a special place in this house and in the hearts of its people. From the very beginning of this library your priest of Jericho, Fr. Montague Noel, would come to preach and teach to those who came here seeking guidance. His friend, Stuckey Coles (whose year's mind falls near your day) would go to encourage and strengthen your folk of Jericho. What would you have us hear from you today to serve our own life of discipleship, our walk of faith?

Barnabas' answer, of course, comes first to us in the story told in scripture. We heard, in the reading, something of his work in Antioch but that came later. Perhaps the first guidance Barnabas gives us comes from his own vocation, his calling. In Acts 4:36 we read, “There was a Levite, a Cypriot, Joses to whom the Apostles gave the name ‘ὑἱος παρακλήσεως’” which has been variously translated as, “Son of comfort” or “Son of consolation” or “Son of encouragement”. Barnabas was among those who, from their assets, realised money to enable the mission and pastoral care of the Church. However, he was singled out for his specific and much needed gift, which the Apostles discerned. He accepted their discernment and responded. In his acceptance of that discernment Barnabas helps us to understand that for each of us there is a call to serve the mission of the Church, the work of our Lord on earth. That call is not subjective; we do not discern it for ourselves. It comes from the heart of God. We respond, the Church discerns and thus the Gospel is proclaimed.

Even before Barnabas was sent to Antioch, there was another most telling scene. Saul, as we know, had gone to Damascus, breathing out fire and slaughter. His reputation for violent persecution had gone before him and even after his transforming encounter with the Lord Jesus on the road that image still clung to him. It was hard for the Apostles to change their view of one who had connived at the stoning of Stephen. Acts 9: verse 26 and following tells us, “But Barnabas took him, brought him to the Apostles and described for them how he had seen the Lord on the road” So began his courageous ministry of standing with the excluded, the rejected, the demonised. It would happen again. Perhaps Barnabas’ *leitmotif* might be expressed as “Give another chance” It is small wonder that Barnabas has been dubbed, “Saint of the second chance” We shall see again that Barnabas believed in life after failure.

He has taught us something about vocation. Here perhaps Barnabas also offers us a warning about the demonization that sometimes sneaks its way in to the life of the Church and adjures us, where it is possible, where it is right and where we see God is at work amid the brokenness, we should be alive to that in one who has fallen and defend their second chance.

Paul’s second chance was perilous for him and for them all. He was packed off to the relative safety of Tarsus and Barnabas was sent to Antioch where, as we were told in the reading, he lived out his vocation, revealing the quality for which he had been named. He exhorted – encouraged – comforted (*παρεκαλει*) the newly baptised, calling them to remain faithful with steadfast devotion.

The workload was enormous so Barnabas went and collected Saul from Tarsus so that he could help with the Hellenist converts. Then the Saul – Paul story began to unfold.

Here is another waymarker from Barnabas; he was content to ask for help when it was needed for the work and he seems not to have bothered at all about his role; his status in the church local. He did not trip over his own ego.

Just as an aside . . . if it hadn’t been for Barnabas we might never have had the Pauline epistles. I expect you are all very grateful for that.

The last word for this evening comes from an encounter after Barnabas and Paul had been on their first missionary journey. Once back in Antioch Paul proposed a return visit – a review of the churches they had founded. Barnabas suggested they took John Mark with them and Paul point-blank refused! Luke records a “bitter dissention” between Barnabas and Paul over the issue. The background to that altercation was set during their first missionary journey when they, accompanied by John Mark, arrived in Pamphylia. John Mark left them suddenly and returned to Jerusalem apparently without so much as a by-your-leave. Paul saw that departure as desertion, clear and simple. Perhaps Barnabas saw that the truth of every apparent failure is rarely clear and almost never simple. What Paul saw in black and white Barnabas saw in shades and grades.

Of course there were personal factors in play. John Mark was a younger relative of Barnabas so there may have been a sense of *in loco parentis* about his stance but whatever other influences there might have been, this seemed to be a moment for restoration – a second chance. Paul would have none of it so he and Silas sailed for Derbe, Lystra and beyond, while Barnabas and John Mark returned to Cyprus.

That “bitter dissention” does not seem to have permanently damaged relationships, as later references reveal. Later still it was John Mark who cared for Paul during his imprisonment. In any case much about that argument remains hidden from us. However, here, once more and for whatever motives, not only do we see Barnabas striving for the healing of relationships, seeking the second chance we also see him prepared to chart his own course according to that end.

Barnabas speaks to us from the pages of scripture. He tells us what it is like to allow our gifts and vocation to be discerned and shows us the humility and sacrifice that will entail.

Standing beside Paul and facing the fearful Apostles we see one who is unafraid of “guilt by association” and who will stand alongside the repentant sinner, the rejected and the demonized.

In Antioch we see one for whom the mission and ministry of the Church was far more important than his own status within it. As a leader of the Church he did not, as so many have done since, trip over his own ego.

Thanks be to God for Barnabas the Cypriot Levite, now numbered among the saints, here present and rejoicing in the great cloud of witnesses who gather with us at this altar.

Amen.